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HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO WRITE?

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In this article I explain how understanding reflexivity and using personal narrative helped me to solve the problem of how to write a critical qualitative study of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) from the standpoint of a writer located in the English-speaking West.

The study is about how a dominant native-speakerist ideology is the root of cultural chauvinism, or "culturism," in that it essentialistically characterizes the "non-native speaker" Other as culturally problematic within the domain of a "Western" pedagogy (Holliday, 2005). A major data source for this study is e-mail statements from 36 TESOL educators from a range of countries and educational sectors, including the so-called Periphery.

The problem of how to write arises from the dilemmas concerning who I am speaking for, and who I am to be able to do this. I write from a position of power and privilege, from the best resourced part of the TESOL world. Canagarajah and others suggest that people from the English-speaking West are not able to speak about or for people and communities to which they do not belong. His attack on "white-skinned teacher/researchers from rich communities [who] visit dilapidated classrooms of brown-skinned vernacular-speaking students in periphery communities" (1999, p. 51) needs to be taken seriously. Although I feel uncomfortable about the way Canagarajah puts this into such markedly oppositional, indeed racial, terms, and although his own views on this issue are now developing in a different direction, as demonstrated in his article in this issue, there is a truth in what he says in 1999, which needs to be addressed. Research of this nature also often aids the "Centre" rather than empowering "Periphery" communities (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 45). Hyde (2002) suggests quite rightly that members of the "native speaker" TESOL "Centre" only get into discussions that support the "non-Centre" to develop their own "Centre" discourse, and that we are all, in effect, playing with our own discourses to locate ourselves within the larger political matrix to get the best advantage.

How, therefore, do I counter these issues? The first thing is to accept the notion of reflexivity. This is to understand that "the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 16). It would, therefore, be a mistake to deny who I am and what my own ideological preoccupations are, and to realize, and capitalize on the fact that I am an interactant in the area I am researching in one way or another.

Personal Narrative

I found the beginnings of an answer to the question in personal narrative. This can be defined as any form of narrative that tells a personal story. It at first seems problematic, in postpositivist terms, because it is so subjectively personal that it cannot be validated. Because it is autobiographical in nature it will inevitably comprise one's own images, interpretations, and indeed imaginations of past events, which may be so far in the past that there is no way they can be attested to by anyone else. It can appear to do no more than tell a novelistic story that has no scientific value. However, I found the personal narrative very useful to excavate aspects of my own ideology. One example of this is the following:

> I was 24 years old and beginning my career as a teacher at the British Council in Tehran. In the middle of one of my lessons, an Iranian man who must have been in his 40s or 50s stood up at the back of the classroom, apologized for interrupting in this way, and asked me if I could explain the grammar underlying the language structure I was asking him to repeat. I put him down rather abruptly by saying that in "*these* classes"

> he did not need to think about grammar, and that to do so would get in the way of his learning. I thought the request was unscientific and unnecessary, and showed the lack of understanding of "how to learn" that I expected from Iranian students. More than this, but connected, I thought his whole manner was ridiculous because he translated directly from a Farsi expression of politeness and had not even realized that this was inappropriate in English.

This narrative revealed for me some of the origins of native-speakerist culturism deep in the fabric of my own early professional life, and that of people like me who ventured forth with a naïve arrogance from the English-speaking West to educate the foreign Other. I think the narrative shows clearly the connection between teaching someone how to learn and correcting imagined "inadequacies" in their culture.

The lesson in the narrative was audiolingual, but I was able to find residues of this attitude in current practice. And, this led me to construct a larger narrative of how powerful threads of cultural prejudice stretched not only into attitudes toward students but also toward "non-native speaker" colleagues. The juxtaposition between these two groups within the native-speakerist psyche made me see that they are both constructed as a culturally problematic "non-native speaker" Other, generalized in opposition to an unproblematic "native speaker" Self (see Pennycook, 1998, pp. 10–16)—as I am so clearly in the aforementioned narrative.

Speaking Only for Myself

Learning about my own narrative enabled me to understand the voice I was able to project in my study of native-speakerist culturism, the whole of which is in effect my own personal narrative of a multicultured international experience—of how I have learnt from my colleagues who are different from myself to see things differently and to at least partially escape the deep-seated prejudices of my professionalism. All the people I have interviewed are colleagues who I have worked with or met at conferences, or who have been my students, and who have influenced me in the past, and have continued to influence me in the current narrative. They are not a representative sample of opinion: what binds them and makes them meaningful is their relation to my own professional biography.

I do not therefore presume to be speaking *for* any of them. I speak only for myself, as someone who has worked with and learnt from them. All the examples I cite from my own personal experience speak to me in a similar way to the voices of my interviewees. The only systematicity in the way I have collected and used the data is that it resonates with what I feel is important in connection with my theme. In this sense I am writing from only my own position, from my own experience as an educator from the English-speaking West with a particular biography, training, and socialization. This means that the examples from my own experience are written as personal narratives that incorporate the voices of others as I have interpreted them.

Breaking From Postpositivism

Researchers' own personal narratives, which Atkinson (1990, p. 104) defines as "the representation of events," are gaining respectability in qualitative research. Coffey maintains that "there is a widespread assumption that they [narratives] offer uniquely privileged data, grounded in biographical experience and social contexts" (1999, p. 115).

This is very different from the postpositivist naturalist view in which the researcher's voice stays in the third person and maintains an unobtrusive distance from the "untouched," "self-evident" voices of the people in the research setting:

> Conventionally this view of ethnographic practice has emphasized the *other* lives that are being observed, analysed and produced. The ethnographer serves as a biographer of others. [...] Considerably less emphasis is placed on the autobiographical practices of the researcher-self. (Coffey, 1999, p. 7, her emphasis)

More progressivist writers now see this third person distance as naïve in its ignorance of the creative presence of the researcher (e.g., Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997; Miller, Nelson, & Moore, 1998; Richardson, 1994) and deceptive in the illusion it creates of an "all-knowing interpretive voice" and a "timeless space called the 'ethnographic present'" (Foley, 1998, pp. 110–111; see also Holliday, 2002, pp. 128–130, 176–177).

I argue that in the written form of research, the only narrative is that of the researcher. The accounts and talk produced by the people in the research setting are done so in response to the elicitations of the researcher and then incorporated into the researcher's own narrative. This means that researchers can never claim to be speaking for anyone but themselves and cannot claim to be representing the voices of others.

I find it useful to articulate the role of personal narrative as one of a collection of interconnected voices in the written text of the research. The *first voice* is in fact the personal narrative because this is about what happened to stimulate the research or to help the researcher get into the data. The *second voice* comprises the data (descriptions, artefacts, transcripts, recordings, documents, etc.). In this sense, separated pieces of personal narrative, such as the one presented earlier, are also data about the self and take on the same status as an interview transcript. The *third voice* comments on the data at the time of collection. At the time of writing, this can also act as data—about how the researcher felt when he or she was collecting the data—and can in itself appear as another personal narrative about the experience of doing the research. The *fourth voice* comments on the first three voices at the time of writing. This voice has the critical role of directing the reader to the specific aspects of the data, which are extracted from the corpus into the written study. The *fifth voice* is the final overarching argument that connects and pulls together all the others and that speaks about the whole research process and takes the final responsibility. Voices 1 to 3, voice 4, and voice 5 thus correspond to the distinction between data, commentary and argument, which are the building blocks of thick description (Holliday, 2002, pp. 110–115).

The thick description is built from all the data in voices 1 and 2. Whereas the claims that can be made are largely subjective because they are based on fragments of interview, artefact, experience, and so on, it is the rigorous way in which these fragments are interconnected as thick description that will provide the validity for these claims. I prefer to talk about thick description instead of triangulation. Whereas triangulation is a more postpositivist process of checking "truth," thick description is a process of getting at increased richness and showing interconnectedness. It is the strategic rigour with which the interconnecting voices of thick description are presented that gives qualitative research and the use of narrative its validity.

In this way, connecting a description of the lack of personal space and privacy and the high level of surveillance in a U-shaped classroom, and a teacher's statement about how she is discriminated against because of her supposed speakerhood, with the personal recollection, presented earlier, of my own cultural missionary zeal early in my career, allows me to begin building a thicker description of what is happening in the politics of TESOL. However, the connection has to be interpreted and demonstrated within my own larger authorial voice. This picture of a researcher-led text, which includes a complexity of other texts, can be expressed as follows:

> By incorporating, fragmenting and mingling these texts, and by reinforcing the intertextuality of ethnography, the claims to authenticity may be strengthened rather than weakened. Writing the self into ethnography can be viewed as part of a movement toward greater authenticity, and as part of a biographical project. (Coffey, 1999, p. 118, citing Atkinson)

My study of native-speakerist culturism is therefore my own autobiographical project. The reason I should wish to write such a thing is that embedded in my own autobiography are discourses, behaviours, and relationships, in my own actions and in my perceptions of the actions of others, which display the nature of TESOL, its conflicts, and its hopes.

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RHETORICIZING REFLEXIVITY

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The personal has become mainstreamed in research writing. Even quantitative studies now make a gesture toward acknowledging the personal in the article. When you come to think about it, in traditional scholarly discourse there was still space for reflexivity. At the end of their articles, where researchers acknowledged limitations and provided suggestions for future studies, there was space for some critical reflection. Authors could acknowledge their context and positioning if they wanted to. However, after the challenges to the empirical and positivist research approaches, we now have more diverse ways of representing the personal in research literature. The personal has received greater centrality in scholarly activity and writing. Because reflexivity is becoming a fashionable gesture in certain disciplines now, treated almost as an end in itself, there is the danger that we may have gone overboard in making a case for the personal. It is time, therefore, to take a sober look at the way the personal is represented in academic writing.

The need to assess the diverse rhetorics of reflexivity became apparent to me when I was recently reviewing Brian Street's (2001) *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives* for a journal. In keeping with changes in critical ethnographies (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), almost all the contributors in this collection attended to the personal in their accounts. I want to draw attention to two successive chapters that created a conflict for me. The authors adopted different discourses in their research and writing to represent the personal. However, the article that adopted a very creative and sophisticated postmodern discourse left me dissat-