

Recognising what English language students bring to the classroom: autonomy, authenticity and Web 2.0

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My paper will draw attention to the significant existing linguistic and cultural competence which students everywhere bring to the English language classroom from their own communities. These are both employed and revealed by Web 2.0 opportunities. If teachers can recognise and channel this resource it will help them to deal with a wide range of educational settings with less dependence on traditional classroom routines, and will help their students to achieve a more authentic ownership of English. There are however barriers - entrenched beliefs that English implies problematic values, 'native speaker' models and cultures of language and learning. There are therefore important things to understand - the fluidity and cosmopolitan nature of English and culture, and how this relates to the existing experience of students.

This paper matches two observations. The first is what we can see around us in the everyday manner in which language is used creatively in a multiplicity of ways and circumstances by people everywhere - naturally creative and accomplished users of language within their existing communities. The second is the web-based technology which enables students to bring this creativity into direct integration with the learning of English. While this paper is motivated by the newer developments of this technology, its main concern is the contribution of students' existing linguistic competence.

A major point which I will make is that what is self-evident about the creative and autonomous nature of this existing linguistic competence is constantly hidden by the prejudices within the confining formal structures of our lives and professions, and from out-dated and destructive ideologies of cultural difference. These prejudices have held back both the English language teaching profession as a whole and also the effective implementation of web-based technology. Indeed, Warschauer (2004, citing Feenberg) notes that where there is very often an empty rhetoric in policies about implementing web-based technology, real progress struggles at the margins.

Students acting creatively by themselves

During the last decade there has been a revolution in web-based technology. Web 2.0 has enabled us to use the internet not just to get information, but to interact creatively and productively with information and people and to create our own worlds in collaboration with others. A number of studies in a range of national, cultural and educational settings describe how blogging and social networking sites enable language students to engage with language and other language users on their own terms, applying their natural abilities and interests in communication (e.g. Alm 2006; Ducate & Lomicka 2008; Harrison & Thomas 2009; Hockly 2013; McLoughlin & Lee 2007). A significant message that comes through in these accounts is that students are able to relate these activities

to their personal identities and interests. Lin and Cheung report on the use of such sites in a low-resourced secondary school in Hong Kong and note that they build on the natural literacies which the students bring with them from their home environments. 'Print, visual and multimodal' texts from 'pop-music culture (e.g., songs, magazines, concerts, festivals, comics, interviews with pop stars, and so on)' are 'especially important for young people as they go through the often difficult adolescent stage' with the 'everyday successes and failures', 'searching for their identities', 'constructing their self-image, and finding their self-worth' (Lin & Cheung 2014: 140).

There are two important points to note here. (a) Experience with Web 2.0 not only tells us about what can be done with this very sophisticated technology. It provides us with a window onto the students' existing linguistic competence which has hitherto been hard to capture within formal education. (b) The textual cultural content in Web 2.0 materials is not pre-determined, but for the students to create, choose and negotiate. The element of choice of material is crucial. This helps us realise that authenticity is determined by this choice. I shall deal with each of these points in turn.

Creativity and choice

The immensely creative student behaviour with new language which is being seen in the engagement with Web 2.0 has also been revealed by critical ethnographic research in the last two decades. Moreover, it is a behaviour which has often gone un-noticed by their teachers. Sri Lankan secondary school students write their own references to local and Western cultural realities into the margins of their American textbook, and recast characters in so-called authentic American texts as Tamil film stars (Canagarajah 1999b: 88-90). University students in Kuwait engage in sophisticated play with English among their friends (Kamal 2015). UK inner-London secondary school students from a variety of language backgrounds play with each other's languages and expressions when one might imagine they are misbehaving (Rampton 2011). Mexican university students talk about how they stamp their identity on English by using it to express post-colonial sentiments (Clemente & Higgins 2008). Taiwanese students in a British university study skills class bypass their teachers and practice autonomy to get what they need outside the classroom, when their teachers follow the established cultural stereotype and think they lack autonomy (Holliday 2005: 94, citing Chang). Observation from the back of the class reveals that Hong Kong secondary school students show extensive evidence of communicative engagement with English, often in resistance to their teachers, when their teachers think they cannot because of their 'Confucian culture' (Holliday 2005: 97-98, citing Tong). Iranian of academic English demonstrate high self-motivation for enquiry based learning (Ghahremani-Ghajar et al 2012). Emirati women college students demonstrate high degrees of criticality in dealing with the writing curriculum (Yamchi 2015). Against the long-standing belief that multilingualism in young children is an obstacle to learning, there is evidence that they can practice sophisticated trilingual language play at very early ages (Tracy 2012). Observation of the immense political creativity of my trilingual three-year old grandson confirms this.

If these cases are surprising or unexpected it is because they represent an autonomy which is unrecognised by our sometimes less creative professionalism which in many cases has been informed by false stereotypes about non-Western students which tell us

that they lack autonomy and self-direction because of their culture (Kumaravadivelu 2003). If, however, we recognise their natural autonomy, which they bring from the hurly burly of their daily lives outside the classroom, we can see that they have the potential to make up their own minds about what is meaningful to them, and that they already have considerable communicative skill in sorting out how to work creatively with language in diverse settings.

Similar research also shows students making choices about what they consider to be authentic which go against the traditional professional view. A study of secondary and primary school students across China indicates very strongly that they have a deeply cosmopolitan desire to communicate with the world about identity (Gong & Holliday 2013). However, at the same time, in rural areas they reject the texts about planning vacations and going to McDonalds which they find in their existing textbooks (46). These texts have been chosen by the textbook writers because they are presumed authentic examples of ‘native speaker’ English and an attendant notion of ‘Western culture’ rather than being authentic to the lives of the students (45). This contradiction relates to a very old but often forgotten definition of authenticity presented by Widdowson (1979: 165), when he says that ‘it is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver’. This is seen very well where the authenticity of pursuing their own interests in researching strawberry growing within their own community is at the core of the success of a US laptop-based school project in which school children display high degrees of autonomy and complex, bilingual Spanish-English literacies (Warschauer 2007).

The belief that authentic texts should be examples of ‘native speaker’ English is nevertheless still very predominant (Holliday 2015) and can be traced back to the behaviourism of audiolingualism (Holliday 2005: 45ff), and to the exclusion of other languages (Phillipson 1992: 185).

New understandings about English and culture

The positivist nature of native-speakerism also simplistically equates ‘target’ second language learning narrowly with a ‘target second culture’, and ignores not only the existing linguistic competence but also the existing cultural background of the language student. Once again, engagement with Web 2.0 is revealing here. It not only shows us how people can employ their existing cultural background, it also fits well with new understandings that English can operate perfectly well in any cultural milieu where it is used, and can no longer be associated simplistically with Anglo-Saxon origins (Saraceni 2010). It is therefore important to expand the notion of existing linguistic competence to existing linguistic and *cultural* competence.

An example of this can be seen in a Nigerian novel written in English, where we see a local greeting expressed in English as ‘Did you come out well this morning?’ (Adichie 2007: 423). It is grammatically correct and has a poetic ring to it, but also represents a particular cultural means for greeting which may not be common elsewhere. In a recent seminar with teachers in Mexico, I asked them to think of greetings which could be transported from local Mexican Spanish to English, and similar sorts of expression emerged. These would be highly meaningful to their students; and such expressions can

often travel further. A personal example is of a young Syrian woman, just returned from her university course in the US to visit her bilingual (Arabic and English) family. Within half a day she switched from an American to a Syrian English idiolect, including gestures, body language and cultural references.

The potentials revealed by Web 2.0 also fit a critical cosmopolitan sociology, which looks at how the world fits together rather than how it is divided, and focuses on cultural realities which have long been unrecognised by a Western establishment, and how we can carry our identities across cultural boundaries (e.g. Delanty 2006). This in turn fits with the recognition that a culturally cosmopolitan world existed across a broad network of local communities long before European colonialism divided the world with modernist boundaries (e.g. Canagarajah 1999a), before European 19th century nationalism brought us the now traditional one-culture-one language model (Rajagopalan 2012: 207), and before modernism took us away from the organic richness of indigenous learning styles (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini 2010).

There have always been resilient local communities from which students can bring rich cultural and linguistic resources to the learning of new languages - and more recently to the learning of English. This is very evident in deeply multilingual societies like India where communication is managed effectively across multiple language boundaries on a daily basis, dealing with different languages as though they are multiple genres (Amritavalli 2012: 54; Rajagopalan 2012: 209). In Egypt, over a decade ago, Warschauer et al (2002) note how web-based technology encourages an unprecedented use of written Egyptian Arabic alongside English to express personal identities and a local appropriation of the technology. But there remains a deep political struggle about what type of English should be spoken by whom in communities across the world. This is well expressed in the Nigerian novel *Americanah*, where a young student struggles to maintain a Nigerian English while at school in Nigeria and then living in the US (Adichie 2013).

Social action and small cultures

The ability, also seen in their engagement with Web 2.0, of young people to carry their identities into new domains of language learning also fits with my social action model of culture (Holliday 2011, 2013, 2016). This emphasises a creative dialogue between individuals and the structures of their societies. While different societies and communities do have specific contexts and particular features which make us, our cultural practices and our languages different, they do not necessarily prevent individuals from moving creatively beyond their boundaries. Our ability to engage with small cultural practices in such as family, school, classroom, and sports groups on a daily basis is something we share across nations and communities. There is a broad and significant domain of underlying universal cultural processes which enable all of us to read and engage creatively with culture and language wherever we find it. Just as young people find ways to make sense of and be themselves when they visit their friends' families, they can also make huge sense of other cultural realities without losing their identities. They can also expand their identities by finding ways to innovate within them (Holliday 2013: 19-20).

There are several important implications here. Shared underlying universal cultural processes give language students the potential to apply the experience of how language and culture operates in their own communities to new language. This moreover enables

them to stamp their own cultural identity on the language (Holliday 2014). However, for them to be motivated to do this, the content with which they are presented has to be sufficiently meaningful to resonate with and activate this experience. It is this authentic relationship, between where they come from and new domains, which encourages language students to be cosmopolitan and to claim the world through new language experience.

The social action approach implies a complex relationship between language and culture which does however present a dilemma. While English does not have any particular home and can attach itself to any set of cultural realities, it would be a mistake to think that languages do not carry a sense of culture with them. They cannot be empty vessels waiting to be filled. A solution to this problem may well be in the concept of linguaculture, which can be explained in the following way:

When I as a Dane move around the world, I tend to build on my Danish linguaculture, when I speak English, French or German. I therefore contribute to the flow of Danish linguaculture across languages. (Risager 2011: 110)

What is significant in this description is that there is something small and personal about the relationship between language and culture. There is a strong sense that, while the 'ling' in linguaculture suggest the bond between language and culture, it is individual people who carry culture into language rather than vice versa. This means that language students can indeed carry their linguacultures from their existing communities and languages into English, with identity moving through language rather than the other way round.

This is something which Web 2.0 provides a powerful resource for, but also something we need to recognise and encourage in language students whether or not this technology is available.

Implications for teaching

The discussion so far has emphasised the cultural and linguistic potential which our students bring to the classroom, and how Web 2.0 not only capitalises on this potential but also reveals more about its nature. One might therefore ask what it is that the teacher should do if our students already have these abilities and experiences. The answer is that the important role of the teacher is to help their students to bring these creative potentials into the available spaces within the established curriculum. This is especially the case within state education where there are so many other pressures.

Even where Web 2.0 is available, the time available to devote to it may be severely limited by the other requirements of the curriculum. This is evident in (Lin & Cheung 2014: 149), who report that the use of Web 2.0 could sometimes only be a small space "to breathe a bit of air" - i.e., to relax a bit ... amidst their regular regimented English grammar and vocabulary exercises'. In other settings, although there are government or ministry web-based educational policies in place, its implementation is marginalised by lack of technical training, maintenance or accessibility of equipment, and educational micropolitics and hierarchies (Warschauer 2003, 2006, 2012). Something else that has

been learnt from web-based projects is that even where all the facilities and space *are* available there might be little *educational* progress without structured social support (Warschauer 2012).

The discussion has also emphasised psychological barriers. There are powerful professional and popular prejudices that get in the way, i.e. the native-speakerist distortion of what is authentic. These ways of thinking seduce us with the false, modernist certainty that relationships between language, culture and types of speakers are fixed, neat and measurable. We all need to help each other to move into a new paradigm that puts this way of thinking aside (Kumaravadivelu 2012).

The following suggestions therefore concern how to help language students to make creative use of the creative cultural and linguistic competence which they already possess, and which underpin and are revealed by Web 2.0 opportunities, but which will enhance authentic engagement with English learning:

- Understand that learning English does not in any way mean that we have to leave behind the cultural realities of our communities.
- Develop ways to recognise and avoid the restrictive popular ways of thinking about culture, language and learning. Explore our existing cultural experience to find potentials for creative negotiation with the new cultural content
- Explore what it is in our lives which makes content authentic
- Explore and understand existing linguacultural experience so that we can bring it meaningfully to English

When encountering cultural content in English, we should encourage our students:

- To see relationships between their own life and what they find in English
- To appreciate the complexity and fluidity of their own society and language to understand better the nature of English
- To use their existing experience to take ownership and stamp their identities on English
- To understand that they can be creative with cultural difference and strangeness without losing identity.

Through this process, students should be able to gain an understanding of the negotiable and creative nature of culture, realising that English also has the capacity to express different cultural realities, and that they can use English without the specific forms that they find in their textbooks.

There are also broader educational aims that might be achieved through this approach. These concern the combating of prejudice in multicultural societies and in a globalised world, understanding the complex and political relationship between English, culture and the world, being an intercultural global citizen, being able to position oneself in relation to ideologies and discourses, and generally, acquiring a sociological imagination in claiming ownership of English.

Iranian primary level textbook writers attempt to catch their pupils' imagination in this respect with stories about a turtle who transcends cultural boundaries with her linguaculture:

Turtles are patient and curious, they take their time in water and land, they never worry about where to stay or where to rest because they walk with their homes on their backs! I feel our memories are like their homes on their backs - the memories we carry to wherever we go. The turtle in our stories travels to different places, she talks to different people, she tells us about other people's stories, and she tells her own stories that are usually my/our stories too! (Gahremani-Ghajar 2009: 1)

It is this possibility that other people's stories can also be ours which is at the core of what makes content authentic. Teachers need:

- To know the value of connecting with their students' stories
- To know how to appreciate and manage the knowledge and experience which their students bring to the classroom, and how to allow space for authentic learning
- To help their students bring their stories into English, and to help them connect the stories in their textbooks with their own stories.

Being able to understand the importance of and to allow space for the students' stories, and to admit them into English is at the centre of culture-neutral communicative principles (Holliday 2005: 143). We are already familiar with the first principle - to treat language as communication. The second principle is to capitalise on, to make maximum use of the students' existing communicative competence, which resides in their communities and its languages. The third principle is to communicate with local exigencies, with the things that are going on in their communities and their languages.

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