

Using existing cultural experience to stamp identity on English

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There is a long-standing belief that learning a second language means learning a second culture. In the case of learning English this has sometimes led to a belief that learning a Western culture is in conflict with the culture of the language learners. This paper argues that there is no conflict for three reasons: (a) English can attach itself to any cultural reality; (b) we all share the ability to engage with culture wherever we encounter it; and (c) this enables language learners to carry their own cultural experience into English and stamp it with their own identities. This argument is based on a social action model of culture. Claims of cultural incompatibility must not therefore be taken at face value, but be converted into learning opportunities which encourage deep exploration of the complex relationship between language and culture.

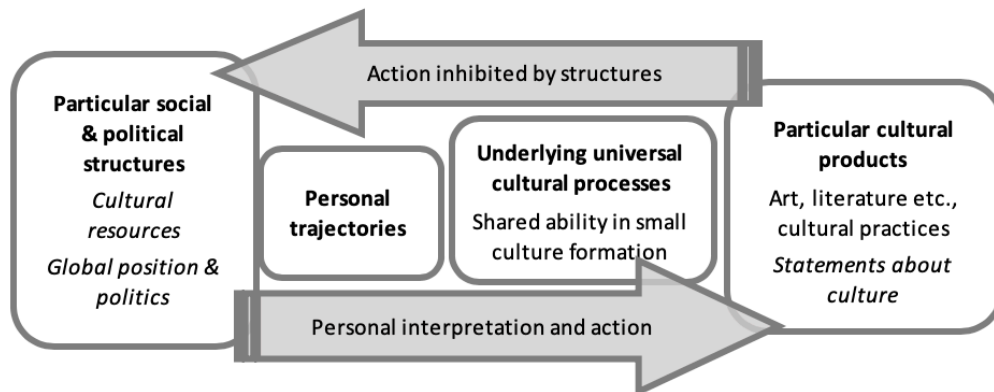
This article looks at how encouraging language learners to build on their existing cultural experience can help them to overcome the common anxiety that English represents a culture which is incompatible with their own. The widespread nature of this anxiety is exemplified by Atay & Ece's (2009) study of the impact of the perceived Western culture of English on a stated 'Muslim culture' among students in Istanbul. There are however other views – that the intercultural encounters created by learning English can be an opportunity for a critical 'culturally responsive education' (Porto 2010) which transcends cultural boundaries. Some indeed feel that English as a global language does not need to be associated with any one culture (Baker 2012), and want to re-think the ownership of perceived 'native speaker' models (Sybing 2011).

I shall move this discussion on further by emphasising the high degree of universal cultural abilities which we all share, which enable us to engage with culture on our own terms wherever we encounter it. This premise will be supported by applying a social action model of culture to the experiences of two language learners, followed by implications for professional practice.

The discussion will be centred around two fictional language learners, Beata and Kira. They are reconstructed from a range of interviews, statements and observations within the

¹ Versions of this paper have been delivered as seminar and workshop content at the School of Languages, University of Guanajuato, Mexico, January 2013 (<http://adrianholliday.com/video>), and at the British Council Cairo, Egypt, January 2014.

The grammar of culture



tradition of 'creative non-fiction' (Agar 1990). It is important that their specific cultural backgrounds are not stated, to minimise the danger of fixing them within a particular cultural definition. However, their experience with English is that of non-Western students learning English in their own country settings. They are both responding to a dialogue in their English language textbook in which two friends pay their own part of, or split the bill in a restaurant:

Beata feels uncomfortable because, in her view, in her culture people always pay for each other, and it would be very unfriendly for anyone to suggest paying for themselves. She therefore feels that the dialogue goes completely against all the values she has been brought up with. She feels that learning the English of the dialogue threatens her culture.

Beata thus clings to the idea that her culture is in conflict with the Western culture of English. Kira, another student in the same class, has a very different response – finding ways to reconcile her cultural background with the content of the textbook:

Kira is also annoyed with the concept of splitting the bill. However, while she has heard that this is the way people do things in the West, she does remember experiencing something very similar when she and her siblings had to divide up household chores. It also helps her to deal with the dialogue when she remembers finding ways to deal with what she considered the quite annoying practice, in the family of one of her school friends, of the children calling their parents by their given names. She has learnt to do the same when she is with them; but she knows that this does not mean she has to change the way she speaks to her own parents.

A social action model of culture

I shall analyse these two responses by using my social action 'grammar of culture' which derives from the late 19th century sociology of Max Weber. The figure below is a simplified

representation of this grammar². It expresses a loose dialogue between what are often thought of as national cultural elements on the left and right and more personal cultural elements in the centre. This dialogue enables the possibility of creative engagement and action and will be explained in the following sections.

The grammar will be used to help understand Beata's position not as something forced upon her by cultural incompatibility, but as something within which she has choices of social action – as demonstrated in Kira's very different response. Each part of the grammar will be expanded as it is referred to.

Particular social and political structures

Beata's claim that in her culture people pay for each other relates to the left of the grammar. This domain responds broadly with the common notion of national culture. It is certainly the case that particular nations will have particular structures, such as education, language, government, and the media, which will give their citizens particular characteristics. English language learners will often say that they write, learn or do other things in a certain way because of their culture. However, in the social action model, instead of determining behaviour and values which confine the individual, these structures are *cultural resources* which can be drawn upon by individuals in different ways depending on circumstances. For example, a Chinese student in an Australian university positions herself in her writing 'as someone who *strategically* used her cultural writing convention' (Tran 2009: 280, my emphasis). Japanese students draw a tradition of silence from somewhere in their cultural background to deal with the harsh and unfamiliar régime of the British language institute classroom in which they cannot speak when they want; but this does not mean that they are always silent (Holliday 2005: 91, citing Hayagoshi).

Particular social & political structures

Cultural resources: Nation: education, language, government etc. Religion, ideology

Global position & politics: Comparing Self with Other in terms of affluence, power, economies, position in the world, values etc.

Therefore, for Beata, paying for each other in restaurants is a cultural resource she draws on to help her to position herself against the foreign cultural practice of friends paying for themselves in the textbook. She may be making an essentialist over-generalisation because she feels cornered. Nevertheless, the cultural references she makes are important and real to her.

In contrast, Kira draws on the resources of sharing chores with her brothers and sisters and her experience of reconciling her own values with those of the family next door. She therefore draws on her

knowledge of cultural complexity rather than a polarised image of cultural conflict.

The bottom left of the grammar relates to the global political dimension, which Stuart Hall (1991) claims always lays behind any reference to 'culture'. In this respect, Beata may

² This grammar of culture is introduced in Holliday (2011a: 131), and its workings in everyday life are developed in detail in Holliday (2013). It also grows from my concept of small cultures (Holliday 1999, 2011b). See also my description of the grammar at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles>.

well feel marginalised by the cultural content of the textbook. Indeed, it has been argued that where 'native speaker' models of interaction are suggested as the norm in English communication they represent a Western hegemony (Kumaravadivelu 2012).

Personal trajectories

Personal trajectories:
Family, ancestry, peers, profession, sport and leisure groups etc.

The social action model regards Kira's response to the textbook as a dynamic act in which she is not so much confirming her national culture, but developing a personal trajectory in which she adapts her cultural orientation in response to experiences as she travels through life. This is represented on the on the left-centre of the grammar as a bridge between the particular social structures on the left and the more personal domain in the centre of the grammar.

Personal cultural trajectories were a common theme emerging from interviews with 32 informants from across the world, all of whom had developed personal cultural realities which responded to wide ranges of cultural influence (Holliday 2010, 2011a). Among the respondents, Australian Beth describes how she is able to claim French literature as part of her own heritage, just as her Japanese friends claim English literature (2011a: 54). Indian Riti similarly describes how she can go beyond national and racial characteristics, with the capacity, as an actor, to play 'an American, an Italian, an English girl' (50).

An important implication here is that English language learners are not located in one culture and experiencing a language from another. They are instead cultural travellers who carry past cultural experiences into their encounters with English and are able to add the experience of English to their existing cultural repertoires. The Sri Lankan students described by Canagarajah (1999: 90) may not have travelled geographically, but their experience is culturally cosmopolitan because what they scribble in their books indicates 'a mixture of cultural backgrounds' from 'international "pop culture", and the lifestyle of Western entertainment media and youth groups' to 'traditional cultural values and practices' from their 'Hindu religious roots'. They have the potential to engage with and accommodate the foreign, and indeed to create new cultural products. The employment of English in a variety of cultural environments can be seen in postcolonial literatures, international communication, youth cultures and the internet (e.g. Adichie 2013; Saraceni 2010).

Beata may fear a cultural loss if she engages with the practices in the textbook. However, this does not have to be the case. Clemente & Higgins, reporting on their study of Mexican university students, suggest that the 'performance' of English means that:

You speak the language and not let the language speak you ... populate the language with your values, meanings and intentions ... appropriating its forms and conventions for your purposes ... stamp the language with your identity ... go against the grains of the language to reshape it to your expectations ... [and] resist the language. (2008: xi)

The implication here is that although cultural practices can be widely different across national boundaries, they do not necessarily exclude the newcomer. In the social action model Kira has the innate ability to expand her cultural experience without being damaged by strangeness. She can 'stamp' the textbook with her own identity. She recognises that she already has a personal cultural trajectory which can move on to take in the engagement with the textbook. Ironically, by 'resisting' the language, Beata may already, unknown to herself, be on the road to engaging with it more positively. She is not, as she imagines, stuck in one 'culture' and learning English in another. She is already travelling in the sense that she cares enough to relate what she finds in the textbook to who she is.

Kira's response provides us with a glimpse of how she has already engaged with cultural difference in the family next door and has at least understood that she has to find ways to stamp her identity on what she encounters even if she disapproves.

This interaction between personal trajectories, language and culture is implicit in the notion of linguaculture. Karen Risager uses the term to note that 'people carry their Danish language resources with them into new cultural contexts and perhaps put them to use in new ways under new circumstances' (2011: 107). 'For example, 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' (110). I find this a difficult concept to understand; but it appears to be a way of reconciling the need for language to be attached to culture without being attached to a particular culture. It also means that both Beata and Kira can carry their existing linguacultures into English not just without loss, but with huge gain. Indeed, it would be a natural extension of their personal trajectories to carry their backgrounds into English and to colonise it.

I see a connection between the notion of carrying linguaculture to new languages and personal trajectories in the way in which Ghahremani-Ghajar (2009: 1) tries to solve the problem of how to introduce English to Iranian primary school children, without associations with Western culture, but with connection with history and culture. She bases her materials on a family of turtles:

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!

The notion of stories which resonate across cultural boundaries is a huge and rich resource for primary school children. This resonates strongly with the accounts of Chinese school children in rural areas who do not like the 'native speaker' activities in their textbooks, but who have the deeply cosmopolitan desire to communicate with young people across the world about their feelings and identity (Gong & Holliday 2013).

Underlying universal cultural processes

There is a small, personal aspect to my interpretation of linguaculture and the turtles carrying their homes on their backs which I associate with underlying universal cultural processes in the centre of the grammar. It represents the innate ability we all have to read, work with and negotiate our position with culture in whatever form and wherever we find it, in both familiar and unfamiliar scenarios. Small cultures are the immediate domains in which this engagement takes place. They could be the small groups we join or deal with (e.g. family, occupational, friendship). Small culture formation *on the go* might also be the sets of relationship we build around particular events.

Underlying universal cultural processes
Small culture formation:
 Reading and making culture. Constructing rules and meanings. Imagining Self and Other

In this sense, Beata is actually building a small culture in her relationship with the textbook. She socially constructs the textbook as a foreign Other in relation to her imagined Self, and subscribes to an essentialist discourse of culture which underpins this³. While she does not realise this, she is already engaging dynamically with the textbook and with English. She is however in danger of solidifying uncrossable lines between her and English which will be counterproductive.

However, in contrast, Kira employs the same underlying universal cultural skills in a different way with the same unfamiliar textbook content. Kira is able to position herself in relation to the content more positively than Beata, by seeing it in the context of the complexity she is already used to in her own society. Kira therefore has the potential to move, expand and innovate without loss, and to maintain an authentic ownership of English.

In many ways, underlying universal cultural processes are similar to the concept of existing underlying communicative competence in language learning. We encourage language learners to build on the communicative competence which they bring with them from their existing linguistic experience. In a similar manner, when we make sense of the strange, we draw on cultural experiences which we already possess. Like Kira, Beata will be able, if encouraged, to find examples from her own experience to help her make sense of the textbook content in a less polarising manner. Both Beata and Kira already have either tacit or conscious knowledge of how people everywhere share, negotiate and construct cultural practices.

Building on the notion of personal trajectory, it might be argued that engaging with the foreignness of the textbook is one further stage in small culture management. While it may represent a cultural reality with a different national and linguistic frame, it also requires a small culture relationship with the person who is reading it with the same underlying elements of sense making that would apply anywhere.

Particular cultural products

The cultural products domain, on the right of the grammar, relates to what has often been referred to as big 'C' culture. It also relates to cultural practices, such as the sharing or splitting restaurant bills which Beata has encountered in the textbook. These are products

³ There is a discussion of discourses of culture at <http://adrianholliday.com/articles>.

of social action; and while there may be political, economic or other circumstances which make them dominate social life in varying degrees, they do not in essence define the individual, who is free to buy into them also in varying degrees.

Particular cultural products

Artefacts: Art, literature, the media, architecture etc.

Cultural practices

Statements about culture:

Discourses of and about 'culture', ideology, prejudice.

Cultural acts: outward expression of Self & Other, projecting ideal images of how we want to be seen

Cultural products also include what people actually say about culture. As with big 'C' cultural products, such statements about culture can be expressive projections of how their makers wish to be seen rather than true descriptions of their cultural backgrounds. There is certainly a danger that these statements can make exaggerated claims and present an inaccurate, essentialist view of culture. Some people make strong statements about how their 'culture' or nation values individual choice when there is little evidence that individual choice actually has any greater prominence in their country than anywhere else.

It is hard to say how *far* Beata's claim that 'in her culture' everyone pays for each other is an exaggerated response to her construction of the textbook. Her statement is however different to Kira's, which does not present such an extreme polarisation. Kira's statement about culture is that 'some cultural practices everywhere are annoying; we can work out how to deal with them'.

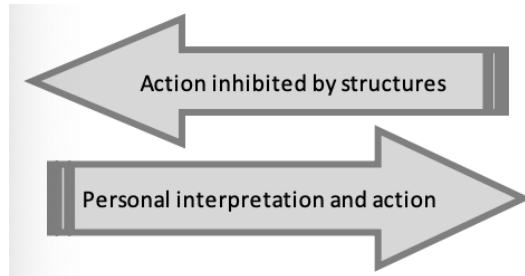
Nevertheless, Beata's claim has to be taken seriously as a crucial part of expressed cultural identity. There are complex reasons for why people make such statements. Grimshaw's (2008: 62) study of Chinese students at university in the UK has revealed that their reputation for embodying the collectivist stereotype – passive, lacking autonomy, not thinking critically, and so on – is largely fed by their own statements. It helps them to play safe within a foreign environment, to make excuses when they underachieve, and fits the exotic image of the East which their tutors already have of them.

The important point to be made here is that whatever the degree of exaggeration might be, statements about culture can never be taken at face value. It is a major point of this article that both English language learners and their teachers need to be aware of this and not take the 'easiest option' of the stereotype, which, no matter how close to an actual state of affairs, is a 'packaged reality' and an illusion.

Within the interaction between Beata and her textbook there is another very important statement about culture which Beata would do well not to take at face value. The textbook itself is a statement about culture in which the writers project a particular brand of English and its culture (Gray 2010). Whatever the content of the textbook may be, it can never claim to capture a full reality of a 'culture' of English, which, even if it were located within a particular nation, must be as complex and variable as Beata's own background. Beata may therefore be naïve and uninformed in interpreting the content of the textbook as a threatening representation of a 'culture' of English. Kira does not see the textbook in this way, as she understands better the complexity of her own society and the complexity of the representation which the textbook represents. Therefore, if Beata has her attention drawn to the strategies behind her own statements about culture, it will help her to unlock the nature of the very similar strategies that underpin the content of the textbook.

Arrows

The arrows at the top and bottom of the grammar indicate the dialogue that runs through it. At the top, the structures of society overwhelm and inhibit action. In the case of Beata, these structures may be the common beliefs about English and culture which surround her



or the educational approach which promotes the 'native speaker' element of the textbook. This would be reinforced by her own collusion with essentialist discourses which imply a restricted image of her society – what Kumaravadivelu (2012: 22-3) refers to as a reduced and marginalised image of who she really is.

At the bottom of the grammar, cultural resources are employed through personal trajectories and underlying universal cultural processes to negotiate individual social action. Kira's strategy seems relatively successful in this respect, as she uses her own cultural background as she acts to negotiate a creative ownership of the textbook. She also shows how she negotiates the structures of her own society. She expands her cultural horizons to take ownership of and indeed claim the world. Kira is also able to understand something about the negotiable and creative nature of culture itself. Through noticing a variability in her own society which Beata might not expect, she might well move on to explore variability in English and search for ways to use English in ways not expressed in the textbook – and to realise that English, just like her own language, has the capacity to express different types of cultural practice.

Alternative learning strategies

In conclusion, the social action model of culture has indicated a number of possibilities for the learning and teaching of English in its relationship with cultural content. The first point concerns what teachers should do when students say there is a cultural conflict with an expression in English. To accept the principle of incompatible cultures is to restrict creativity. Instead, they must encourage their students to explore their existing cultural experience and to find potentials for creative negotiation with the new cultural content.

As learning aims, when encountering cultural content in English, students should be able:

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

Through this process, students should be able:

- o to gain an understanding of the negotiable and creative nature of culture
- o to realise that English also has the capacity to express different cultural realities
- o to realise that they can use English without the specific forms that they find in the textbook.

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.

Postscript

When carrying out workshops with teachers on the topic of this paper, there have been several useful points of discussion which have served to carry forward the discussion and further develop ideas.

Discussion 1: Is this really how it is?

- o Does English really belong to one or two national cultures?
- o 'How did you come out this morning?'
- o What about 'native speaker' models?
- o Why do so many people think of language and culture like this?

Here we interrogated Beata's belief in a conflict between her culture and a Western culture of English by looking at an example of an early greeting from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Nigerian novel (2007: 423). We explored other possible greetings that language learners might bring from their own languages and communities, and to what extent they might be carried successfully into English. The measure of success had something to do with intelligibility and elegance. This led to an interrogation of the place of so-called 'native speaker' models of English and a re-evaluation of authenticity, following Widdowson's early definition (1979: 165), as meaningful to the student rather than the expected 'unsimplified' native speaker English. When considering why so many people take the default position that learning English does mean learning British or American English, several people stated that this came from the national and international media.

Discussion 2

- o Recall an example in your own society where you have faced a cultural conflict similar to Beata's – e.g. to do with family, friends, the workplace, neighbours – perhaps also small languages or discourses
- o How did you, deal with this – constructing Self and Other, constructing discourses?
- o Was there any loss or expansion, or stamping of cultural identity?

- o Was there any cultural innovation?
- o In what sense was there small culture formation on the go?

Audiences seemed to have no difficulty with recalling examples from their lives to fit these points. The example of visiting the family next door as children seemed very familiar. The point here is that teachers need to imagine their own experiences which will then enable them to ask similar questions of their students.

Discussion 3

- o Recall a time when you exaggerated your own 'culture' to make a point
- o In what ways did your construction distort the true reality of things?
- o Why did you do it?
- o Why do you believe other people (students, teachers, textbook authors) when they do it?

The answer to the final question has often been a definite 'no', which indicates to me that once the question is posed this answer is an almost definite. If the question is never posed then the dominant essentialist discourse of culture and language will undoubtedly prevail.

Discussion 4

- o Devise an activity which involves students collecting data about their home life that helps with the learning of English
- o How would you help them to make the connection?
- o What exactly would you ask them to do?
- o How would they be asked to report?

This activity type is at the core of the non-essentialist social action approach to teaching English related to cultural context. It is important to note that while students have rich experience which they can make use of, they might not realise this. This is especially the case because of all the forces from society and the educational establishment which act against this awareness, as noted above with respect to the arrow at the top of the grammar. This task and its related questions emphasise the criticality of how the issue of cultural experience should be approached. If teachers simply ask their students about how their culture relates to English, they may invite responses similar to those of Beata – that their culture is simply different to that of English. Such responses would be polarised, essentialist and counterproductive. This is because the essentialist discourse of English and culture is so powerful. Teachers therefore need to think very carefully about how to ask questions about culture which invite their students to avoid easy answers and enter into a more creative and exhilarating exploration.

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