

Chapter 6: Social autonomy: addressing the dangers of culturism in TESOL

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Introduction

This chapter will explore how we need to rethink current associations between 'autonomy' and language students, in order to address a reductive culturism which I believe pervades TESOL. I shall begin with a critique of two dominant conceptualisations of student autonomy. The first is characterised by a long-standing 'us'-'them' native-speakerism. Although the second is based on a more critical cultural relativism in which native-speakerism is seen as untenable, I see both as being equally culturally reductive. I shall then argue for a third position in which autonomy is defined in the terms brought by students from their own worlds outside the classroom. I suggest that we standardly fail to see this social autonomy because of preoccupations with our own professionalism.

Because my discussion is based within a complex politics of how educators and students with diverse identities see each other, I need to explain how I am using "'us'-'them'", "we" and "our" in the above paragraph. "We" and "our" here, and throughout this chapter when used in unmarked form, refer to the whole *profession* of TESOL. There is no doubt that we (TESOL people throughout the world, e.g. teachers, writers, curriculum developers and publishers) are ourselves divided by the dominant position of the English speaking West (cf. Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994, 1998; Canagarajah, 1999; Jenkins, 2000). However, I believe that we do also have a common, though diversified, international, professional-academic identity, which is manifested in the way that, from our different backgrounds, we come together in faculties, projects and conferences across the world and share a specialist discourse. In contrast to this, the 'us'-'them' polarity is an aspect of the particularly divisive *ideology* of native-speakerism which **[page 110 ends here]** works against our common identity. I define "native-speakerism" as a set of beliefs supporting the view that 'native-speaker' teachers represent the ideals both of the target language and of language teaching methodology. Although TESOL native-speakerism originates in a specific set of educational and development cultures in the English speaking West (Phillipson, 1992), and is an easy position to adopt particularly for those who conceptualise themselves as 'native-speakers', it has had a massive influence and exists to a greater or lesser degree in the thinking of all TESOL people. In this chapter I will therefore argue that the way that we TESOL people commonly think about 'autonomy' both feeds and is derived from this 'us'-'them', native-speakerist ideology, which is culturist and which works to divide us; and I shall explore ways of undoing this ideology.

Throughout I shall use inverted commas to mark the way in which 'us' and 'we' (here, meaning native-speakerists, rather than all TESOL people) and 'our' ('native-speaker') culture are conceptualised within the ideology of native-speakerism as distinct from 'them', 'they' and 'their' ('non-native-speaker') culture. Here, 'native-speaker' is an ideological term denoting someone who is awarded (within the ideology) a special status connected with ownership of the language, and a native-speakerist is someone, from the English speaking West or elsewhere, who promotes this ideology (cf. Holliday, forthcoming).

An 'us'-'them' discourse of participation

The commonly held notion of autonomy in TESOL is, I think, represented in this statement from Harmer's (2001) *The practice of English language teaching*, which might be considered the standard text on TESOL pedagogy:

However good a teacher may be, students will never learn a language - or anything else - unless they aim to learn outside as well as during class time. ... To compensate for the limits of classroom time and to counter the passivity that is an enemy of true learning, students need to develop their own learning strategies, so that as far as possible they become autonomous learners. This does not always happen automatically. Attitudes to selfdirected learning are frequently conditioned by the educational culture in which students have studied or are studying ...; autonomy of action is not always considered a desirable characteristic in such contexts. (Harmer, 2001: 335) **[page 111 ends here]**

There are several elements here which are problematic. "Passivity" is placed in unquestionable opposition to "autonomous learners" and "true learning." Then, "educational culture[s]" or "contexts" are cited as conditioning influences *against* "autonomy of action." The implication is thus that 'other' educational cultures or contexts negatively influence students, who are presumed not to have autonomy, whereas "true" language learning is located in a place where autonomy can be 'developed' through "learning strategies." It seems, then, that the educational origin of the student is seen as Other to that of TESOL; and there is a strong native-speakerist implication that "corrective training" (Foucault, 1991) will need to be provided for 'foreign', 'non-native' students from Other contexts.

The opposition between passivity and autonomy which is revealed in the above quotation also seems to underlie the following examples of TESOL discourse that I have heard in and around conference events:

- (a) "Students from [country X] are passive" (teacher referring to students used to a transmission, lecture mode, who did not say enough in a more 'participatory' classroom);
- (b) "She's a problem student because she never says anything" (teacher);
- (c) "The class went well. It was very lively" (teacher). (Holliday, 1997: 409-410).

In these examples, the concept of autonomy is embedded in notions of participation and liveliness. Statements (a) and (b) give an impression that some students have come to the class with the inappropriate behaviour they have brought from Other educational cultures, which statement (a) locates in the specific country X. What the students referred to are accused of lacking is the quality of 'liveliness', which is praised in statement (c).

Despite my criticisms, such views are deeply embedded in my own professional development. When I worked as a curriculum consultant in Egypt and Syria in the 1980s I did not question the British Council agenda that what had to be changed was the 'passivity' of students in 'local' university language classes. There was a very strong feeling at the time that 'passive' students (i.e. not speaking, only listening) lacked the autonomy to learn effectively. I always felt that the best classes were the ones where the students were orally 'active', and that the less successful classes were the ones where the students were quieter and 'less active' (Holliday, 1994: 83). And one may wonder exactly what [page 112 ends here] the issue is here, as the truth of what Harmer and the people in the conference say may seem self-evident, especially to those teachers who have struggled with non-forthcoming language students from different parts of the world. However, there is an increasing body of discussion which suggests that this type of characterisation of 'foreign' students is native-speakerist, unfounded and the product of essentialist cultural overgeneralisation (e.g. Spack, 1997; Kubota, 1999; Holliday, 1999).

Racism or culturism?

Kubota (1999, 2001) is one of a growing number of applied linguists who follow the anti-essentialist literature in the social sciences which links the manufacturing of exotic 'cultures' by the West to its colonial narrative of making the foreign Other look primitive and in need of civilising (e.g. Sarangi, 1995; Pennycook, 1998; Holliday, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999). She critiques the current TESOL narrative, in which Asian students from the Pacific Rim are constructed as lacking in the autonomy and critical thinking which are seen as necessary for effective pedagogy:

The intellectual qualities posed as ideal for US students are independence, autonomy, and creativity, and students should ideally develop analytical, objective, and critical thinking skills. ... These qualities are presented as diametrically opposed to the characteristics of Asian students, who are described as being intellectually interdependent, inclined to preserve rather than create knowledge, reluctant to challenge authority, and engaged in memorisation rather than analytical thinking. ... Asian students allegedly plagiarise because they do not share the Western notion of text authorship that stresses originality, creativity and individualism. Asian students are described as reticent, passive, indirect, and not inclined to challenge the teacher's authority. ... Their written communication style is often characterised as indirect, circular, and inductive. (Kubota, 2001: 14)

Kubota discredits this view by describing how US educators, who report a 'crisis' in some US secondary school and college classrooms, use the same terms to describe US students - as "passive, docile, and compliant rather than active, creative and autonomous" (2001: 17-20).

Kubota therefore suggests that although the image of passivity may appear to specify a particular non-US cultural group, it is in fact used indiscriminately to describe the unsatisfactory Other of the day, whatever that may be. **[page 113 ends here]**

Kubota attributes the indiscriminate othering of the foreign to “the persistent racism of contemporary society” (2001: 28). While I agree with Kubota’s overall argument, I prefer the term culturism to racism as the root process we need to consider here. By culturism I mean reducing the foreign Other to simplistic, essentialist cultural prescriptions (Holliday, 1999: 245; 2002a: 186; forthcoming). Culturism is thus very like racism in that both reduce and judge a strange Other according to negative stereotypes, but different in that it applies to the othering of cultural groups which are not necessarily racially distinct. Kubota focuses largely on the way in which a racist dominant discourse of TESOL within the English speaking West perceives ‘non-white’ TESOL people and students from the East. I would like to extend and refine this focus to the way in which native-speakerism perceives teachers and students who ‘come from other cultures’ outside the English speaking West, even within Europe - especially where these ‘other cultures’ are perceived as discouraging autonomy.

Whether we are talking about racism or culturism, I find very apposite Kubota’s (2001: 28) reference to the way in which prejudices are hidden by the “contemporary discourse of liberal humanism,” especially in “a nice field like TESOL” (Kubota, 2002: 84). It can be argued that ‘nice’ middle class people from comfortable societies think that by talking about ‘cultures’, and admiring their ‘exotic’ qualities, they are ‘accepting’ and ‘being tolerant’ and ‘understanding’ of them - whereas in fact they are simply reducing them to stereotypes. Jordan and Weedon (1995: 149-50) assert that the ‘commodification’ of racial and cultural difference is “a marked feature of the radical twentieth-century avant-garde.” ‘Nice’ TESOL people can thus enjoy their exotic students who bring them the opportunity of ‘discovering another culture’. ‘Other cultures’ thus become objects to be ‘nice’ about instead of groups of real people with whom ‘we’ can interact and be equally people.

A further point made by Kubota (2001: 10-11) is that “the Othering of ESL/EFL students by essentialising their culture and language presupposes the existence of the unproblematic Self as a monolithic, normative category.” Thus, in Harmer’s statement (cited above), while the (Other) students, from other educational cultures, are seen as problematic, the Self of the teacher remains unproblematic. This ‘unproblematic Self’ within TESOL is consonant with its history of being so positivistically self-assured in the efficiency of its teaching technology that it can overlook social and political context (Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 1994; Coleman, 1996) - as a technologised discourse which presents itself as “‘context free’, [and] as usable in any relevant context” (Fairclough, 1995: 104). **[page 114 ends here]**

Three approaches to autonomy

In Table 6.1, I summarise three approaches to autonomy in TESOL, the first two of which can be linked to the state of affairs which Kubota describes. Approach A is native-speakerist in the way in which the native-speakerist ‘we’ perceives ‘them’ from ‘other cultures’. I think this approach is linked with the two non-political versions defined by Benson (1997). (See also Oxford’s discussion of these versions in this volume.) It certainly promotes the Self of the teacher as un-

problematic. Students are considered autonomous when they behave in ways which conform to an image of the 'native speaker' and her culture. Although the native-speakerist approach is ostensibly learner-centred, it falls into the trap of conceptualising what is good for the 'learner' in the terms of the language learning activities which the teacher constructs (Holliday, 1999b). Surely it is not possible for teachers, who are not themselves 'learners', and who do not therefore belong to, and cannot easily understand the world of 'learners', to be 'learner-centred'. The conceptualisation of 'learner' is in itself problematic in that, rather than being viewed as a whole person, she is an operative within a teacher-constructed environment, defined by, limited and therefore reduced to measurable skills and needs (Usher and Edwards, 1994; Clark and Ivanič, 1997: 84; Holliday, 2001a). The outcome is a control of 'learning' through planned tasks which serve the technical needs of the discourse rather than the real student. Anderson (forthcoming) demonstrates this in his ethnography of a British university teaching centre which reveals how, despite a discourse of learner-centredness, lessons are highly controlled.

Table 6.1: Three approaches to autonomy

| Approach | [A] Native-speakerist 'Learner autonomy' 'Learner-centred' | [B] Cultural relativist Critical linguistics | [C] Social autonomy Pre-existing social autonomy People in society |
|--------------------|---|--|---|
| Assumptions | 'We' (native-speakerists) must teach 'them' (from 'other cultures') how to be autonomous in 'our' educational settings. Autonomy needs to be induced by means of learner training - in the image of 'the native speaker' and 'her culture' Constructed by teacher-created learning activities | 'We' (from the English speaking West) cannot expect 'them' (from 'other cultures') to be autonomous like 'us'. | Everyone can be autonomous in their own way. Autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students, which they bring with them from their lives outside the classroom Often hidden by learning activities |
| World view | 'Our culture' is superior. | One 'culture' cannot be like another. | Culture is uncountable and negotiable. |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| Problem (as perceived by owners) | 'They' cannot be what 'we' (native-speakerists) want them to be because 'their culture' does not allow them. | It is unrealistic to expect 'them' (from 'other cultures') to be like 'us' | We (all TESOL people) always tend to be culturist, reducing 'them' to cultural stereotypes. Our professionalism prevents us from seeing people as they really are. |
| Solution (as perceived by owners) | Learner training or acculturation. | 'They' or 'we' must develop special methodologies that suit 'them'. | We must stop being culturist and learn to see through our own professionalism. |

Approach A suits the objectives of professionalism as described in Harmer (2001, as cited above), through which teachers can be trained to deliver 'learner training', and which has given birth to a wide range of 'how-to-do-it' literature for teachers (e.g. Nunan, 1997). This thinking also encourages native-speakerist teachers to be crusaders in their quest to change their students into 'better' thinkers and 'learners'. It is deeply culturist in its vision of 'our' superior 'native-speaker' culture; and leads many teachers to despair at the unsolvable problem of not being able to teach in the way they wish because their students 'from other cultures' 'refuse', or are 'unable' to comply.

Approach B is related to critical linguistics in that it recognises the political side of autonomy (Benson, 1997) and the changing ownership of English which confirms the untenability of native-speakerism. Kubota nevertheless critiques a version of approach B in referring to [\[page 115 ends here\]](#) Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) and Atkinson (1997). Atkinson (1997: 72) claims there is an opposition between critical thinking and "many cultures [which] endorse modes of thought and education that almost diametrically oppose it," an opposition which resonates with that drawn between autonomy and other cultures in my initial quotation from Harmer (2001), above. There is also a hint of native-speakerism in Atkinson's (1997: 79) labelling of the people who come from these "non-Western cultural groups" as "nonnative thinkers." This is, however, different to approach A in that language educators need to be wary of imposing the "individualism, self expression and using language as a tool for learning" which are "deeply implicated in critical thought," and which may "marginalise" rather than improve the learning of language students (Atkinson, 1997: 89). Approach B is culturist in that autonomy is seen as a Western phenomenon which 'we' (from the English speaking West) should therefore not expect 'non-native' students to adopt because of 'their' cultural origin. Although native-speakerist corrective training is felt, in approach B, to be unjust on the grounds that all 'cultures' are equal, students from some 'cultures' are excluded from the educational treatment given to students from others, and therefore treated divisively. There is a complex dilemma here which is expressed by Pennycook (1997). He rightly advocates that students from other places should find "cultural alternatives" to Western constructions of autonomy, perhaps with non-native-speakerist forms which allow for the "silent, unobserved resistance" that I describe in the second part of this chapter, and/or which allow for *choosing* to be taught

in a “teacherly way” (p. 43); but at the same time he seems to fall into a cultural relativist trap of expecting, on the basis of essentialist descriptions of cultural difference, that students who do not come from the West cannot participate in a “concept of individual autonomy” (1997: 36), and that, somehow, silent resistance is not individual. There is still a sense in approach B of ‘us’ ‘native-speakers’ denying ‘them’ (from Other cultures) ‘our’ imagination of autonomy, according to ‘our’ imagination of ‘them’.

Jones’s (1995) account of setting up a university self access centre in Cambodia seems to be a good example of approach B¹. He is culturally relativist in his statement that “the concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values, particularly those of the West” (p. 228). He then makes a massively over-generalised culturist presumption that it is therefore not appropriate to expect “full autonomy,” not only of Cambodians, who he says are “dependent and authority-oriented,” but of people from “many countries between Morocco and Japan” who find it difficult to [page 117 ends here] accept “the individual responsibility and freedom” derived from “Western values” (p. 229). He therefore sets up the self access centre to allow group as well as individual work; and, although he observes that the students manage this very well, with “as often as not eight students at a time gather[ing] around a listening post in order to do an exercise together” or consulting newspapers in the reading corner (p. 231), his overall conclusion is that their preference to work collaboratively erodes the ideal of “individual autonomy.”

In my view there is every evidence that the students in Jones’ study are being autonomous, but in a way of their own which they have brought with them, with which they inhabit the space provided by the self-access centre. That Jones does not see this as ‘full’ or ‘real’ autonomy may relate to his preoccupation with the existing professional discourse (cited by him in some detail), which prescribes for him what autonomy is and which people from which ‘cultures’ can fulfil its requirements.

Approach C in can, I believe, escape this trap of culturism by introducing three disciplines:

- 1) not beginning with an essentialist cultural description of students from a certain part of the world, and not presuming that autonomy is the domain of a Western (or any other) culture;
- 2) trying to see through and beyond a TESOL professionalism which is influenced by native-speakerism, to search for the worlds which the students bring with them.

If there *is* any presumption in approach C, it is:

- 3) presuming that autonomy *is* a universal until there is evidence otherwise - and that if it is not immediately evident in student behaviour, that it may be because there is something preventing us from seeing it - thus treating people equally as people.

1 Jones (1995) is an old paper; and I apologise to the author, who has surely now moved on from the position he expresses there. I am using it because it is a good example of a trend which I feel is still prevalent.

I shall now try and demonstrate how approach C leads to an appreciation of autonomy as a pre-existing social phenomenon.

The régime of the native-speakerist classroom

A further point made by Kubota (2001), which resonates with my own experience, is that there is a tendency in the othering of foreign students (in approach A) to blame the student, or the student's culture for behaviour which might instead be attributed to other factors external to the [page 118 ends here] student such as "an unwelcoming atmosphere" (p. 31). In a qualitative study of a small fragment of video sequences of Japanese high school classrooms (Holliday, 2002b), I observed students engaging in a considerable amount of personal talk, which was not part of the formal part of the lesson but used by students as an autonomous means for dealing with the pressures of the classroom and sometimes to support colleagues who were nominated to speak by the teacher. Personal talk occurred, then, within the *social interaction* domain of the classroom. At the same time, students said very little within in the *transaction* domain of the lesson (I am using Widdowson's (1987) terms here, where 'transaction' is what passes between the teacher and students as part of the pedagogic plan of the lesson, and 'interaction' is the social, non-pedagogic aspect of what happens in the classroom.) In contrast, in British classes students are expected only to talk in the transaction part of the lesson, and only when the teacher is not talking to the whole class - when the teacher specifies, in other words, either in individual responses or in organised group activities. The proper place for talk in the British class is thus controlled by the teacher, and personal talk which is not authorised by the teacher is prohibited. I therefore hypothesised that the often observed quietness of Japanese language students in Britain is brought on by the strangeness (to them) of the way in which talk is expected in the unfamiliar classroom régime. Unable to indulge in personal talk in the social interaction part of the British lesson, tension rises amongst Japanese students, and they subsequently become more silent and less able to engage in the talk which is required in the transaction part of the lesson. They may thus appear 'passive' and lacking in autonomy, but it is more the impact of the strangeness for them of British lessons that brings about reticent behaviour than the 'culture' which the students bring with them.

The régime of the TESOL classroom can therefore be a major factor in inhibiting student behaviour and hiding their autonomy. I refer to this régime elsewhere as the native-speakerist "learning group ideal" (Holliday, 1994: 53) which gives primacy to teacher controlled oral interaction in the classroom and measures both the ability and the self-esteem (see below) of the student in terms of oral expression. (Cf. Pennycook's 1994: 122 discussion of phonocentrism.) This kind of classroom is at the heart of the native-speakerist approach A to autonomy. The connection between autonomy and oral activity can also be traced to the way in which learner-centredness in TESOL has been equated with share of classroom talk, and to the oral-dominated lockstep of audiolingualism (Holliday, forthcoming). [page 119 ends here]

The impact of the régime of the classroom on student behaviour is also addressed in Hayagoshi's (1996) qualitative study of why Japanese students are so 'silent', and by implication lacking in autonomy, in British university language classrooms, when she would normally

expect them to be noisy from her experience as a teacher in Japan. She observes a marked change in the students' behaviour as soon as the British teacher leaves the classroom:

The quietness of these seven Japanese definitely dominated the atmosphere of the classroom. There was nobody to throw a stone into this quietness.

They were very slow to react and rarely express their opinions. ... The teacher went out for a while ... I felt that the tense (hard) atmosphere ... suddenly changed dramatically to a mild gentle one. Actually, I heard one Japanese student sigh with relief. However, this mood vanished when the teacher returned. They were quiet, tense and stressed, again. (Lesson observation 1)

After the class, these quiet Japanese became *normal* students ... friendly and, of course, quite talkative!

Later, she

asked some Japanese students why they were quiet in the classroom. One student answered that "there are some invisible walls around me which prevent me from speaking in the class". (Hayagoshi, 1996, her italics)

It is clear to me that the dramatic change of atmosphere and the self-perceived "invisible walls" are more *imposed* on the students by a régime external to them than by aspects of their cultural personality which they bring with them. Hayagoshi places the responsibility for this phenomenon on the British teachers. It is *their* perceptions which she finds problematic rather than the attitudes of the students.

This difference between what teachers imagine about 'culture' and what students bring from and feel about their own social world is demonstrated in Chang's (2000) interview study of five British applied linguists and four Taiwanese students connected with a study skills course at a British university. The study took place a year after the end of the study skills course when the students were about to finish the MA TESOL programme for which it had prepared them. Two of the applied [page 120 ends here] linguists had taught them on the study skills course and three had taught them on the MA TESOL. As with Kubota and Hayagoshi (cited above), Chang was driven to carry out this study by the way that 'Asian students' are misinterpreted by applied linguists from the English speaking West to the extent that the absence of autonomy is perceived as a 'cultural shortage' (p. 42).

Table 6.2 shows how different the perceptions were. While both the study skills teachers and the MA TESOL lecturers seemed fairly unanimous in thinking that the students needed to be more 'autonomous' and generally to improve their learning skills, the students seemed equally unanimous that what they wanted was more information about what they were supposed to do, in a situation where they did not really have the English to understand their tutors' instructions. Chang reports that the students were already autonomous in their learning

in the sense that they were very happy to work independently out of class, as they had been used to doing in Taiwan, and that they lacked confidence only because of lack of information (p. 42).

Table 6.2: Differences in perception (adapted from Chang, 2000: 45)

| British applied linguists | Taiwanese students |
|--|---|
| think that the students: need more 'self-access' time to become 'autonomous' learners. need to learn how to consult teachers. need to develop study skills. | think that they: need confidence from appropriate instructions, and then they can study 'autonomously' as teachers wish. need to consult teachers more often. Need to develop language skills. |

Chang's findings resonate for me with the experience I had with Iranian trainee ship engineers at Lancaster University in 1980 (Holliday, 1994: 144). After several months of despairing at how incapable the students were at doing technical drawing, it became clear that all they really lacked was information about exactly what they were supposed to do. As soon as they received the simple phrase in Farsi which made this clear, they were able to produce excellent drawings, like the ones they were used to at high school in Iran. It was our own teaching which had confused them! One of the problems with the activity-discovery approach - "look at the . . . and find out how to . . ." - inherent in much native-speakerist TESOL is that exactly what participants are supposed to do is not always transparent to people not brought up in this particular professional discourse. [page 121 ends here]

Autonomous coping

These studies by Hayagoshi, Chang and myself draw attention to a *social* autonomy which students already possess (as perceived in approach C in), which is inhibited by the native-speakerist régime. The sources of this social autonomy can be observed in a wide range of classroom settings outside native-speakerist TESOL. Significantly, as I observed in my Japanese fragments (Holliday, 2002b, cited above), these sources may be clear in the non-formal interactional parts of lessons and therefore not recognised by the native-speakerist régime of approach A. My first experience of students' social autonomy was in the very Egyptian university classrooms (referred to above) in which I was employed to get rid of passivity. Whereas students appeared only to be sitting and listening, 'spoon-fed' by 'dominating' lecturers, they were in fact far from passive. Like the high school students in my Japanese fragments, they were doing a great deal in what I termed the 'informal order' of education: organising seating, distributing lecture notes, forming informal learning groups, negotiating with lecturers, and generally coping with a considerable scarcity of resources, as well as assenting to and appreciating the nature of power bestowed upon the lecturer. Hany Azer harnesses these capabilities in his methodology for independent communicative study in very large classes (cited in Holliday, 1994: 184-191). Shamim (1996) illustrates something similar in a secondary school in Pakistan, where students

show considerable autonomy in the way they organise their seating in different parts of classroom, as does Mebo (1995) in her description of students' attitudes towards colleague competition in finding seats in large classes in a Kenyan university. Tong (2002) also describes in detail how students in secondary school classes in Hong Kong are not the 'passive' people they seem to be at first sight, but in fact demonstrate considerable autonomy:

It is important to note that students in this study have also been found to engage in different kinds of private work, e.g. student reading, working and looking up words in the dictionary, which needed little or no oral interactions, in which students seemed to communicate with the materials and the illustrations. Students looking up words in the dictionary might indicate their initiative and their willingness to be independent life-long learners. ... Students participated, answered or asked questions. Students expressed their opinions or clarified confusions with teachers. Students took opportunities to interact with the researcher. All this shows the students' [page 122 ends here] motivation, confidence, creativity and feeling. Students were not all the time conforming to the will of their seniors. Students reacted to teaching with some disruptive behaviour when they lost interest. Students collaborated with their fellow students when they were asked to speak out in English. (Tong, 2002: 254)

These examples of autonomous student action take place in "hidden sites of critical learning" which are similar to those observed by Canagarajah (2002). He demonstrates this in his observation of Sri Lankan secondary school students writing stories from their own society into the margins and illustrations of a foreign Western textbook. They authenticate the textbook in their own way, but in the interactional 'underlife' of the classroom, out of the transactional sight of the teacher (Canagarajah 1999: 89-90)².

Lacking in self-esteem?

A basic tenet of the native-speakerist approach A to autonomy is that 'passive', non-autonomous students lack self-esteem (e.g. Harmer, 2001: 335). Although it may be presumed by the native-speakerist observer that the Japanese students in Hayagoshi's study (cited above) lack self-esteem, or the autonomous initiative to 'throw a stone' into the silence of the classroom and do something about it, there is no evidence in the study that there could be anything but a temporary loss of self-esteem specific to the confines of the particular classroom régime. In the same way, Tong finds that the Hong Kong secondary school students in his study *appeared* passive when they were dealing with specific aspects of classroom life, for example "when they lost interest in teaching content and withdrew from classroom activities," and when they "were conscious about making errors and possibly being shamed by the teacher or their classmates, losing face, and being disgraced" (2002: 254).

² The relationship between autonomy and authenticity is important here, but beyond the scope of this chapter. I discuss this in detail elsewhere (Holliday, 1999b, forthcoming).

These observations raise the question - why should any student who has not been involved in setting up the system and has no ownership in the design of the régime be expected to participate in its perpetuation? I began to understand this in relation to a group of undergraduate Hong Kong students who came to Britain for an English immersion programme. It took me a while to encourage any of them to be open with me about why they were so reticent in my classes, while at the same time I found them remarkably forthcoming in non-class settings, when encountered on the campus, in the town or on school attachments, and [page 123 ends here] also, to a lesser extent in meetings and tutorials (Holliday, 2001b). Then, eventually, one of the students announced that he was not prepared to expose his English ability for scrutiny in a formal classroom setting, as though this was a very unsound survival proposition. This may be contrary to native-speakerist pedagogical principles - that you cannot learn unless you take part orally. On the other hand, students who make this choice are practising a large degree of social autonomy which is independent of the vision of the teacher and her pedagogy. Autonomy cannot therefore be *created* in the educational setting. It can only be encouraged, perhaps nurtured, or perhaps capitalised upon, because its origin is elsewhere, within the world which the student brings with her. I think this is what Breen and Mann mean when they say:

Autonomy is seen as a way of being in the world: a position from which to engage with the world. ... We are proposing that autonomy is not an ability that has to be learnt ... but a way of being that has to be discovered. (1997: 134, my emphasis)

I emphasise “be discovered” here because in my view this type of autonomy is not something that is easy to see in any TESOL context where there is a very powerful professional discourse standing between the teacher and the students. The régime, not only of the native-speakerist classroom, but of any classroom which is organised along teacherly lines, thus becomes a barrier to seeing the world of the student (Holliday, 2001a: 171). Hence, social autonomy may be actually hidden by classroom activities, or, by what teachers believe these activities ought to be³.

Finding social autonomy

Although I believe there is clear evidence of a social autonomy which students of all types and from all sorts of places utilise both in their daily lives and in dealing with the exigencies of education, it can be invisible to teachers who are preoccupied with their own professional agendas. The studies cited in the second half of this chapter show that the autonomous qualities of students are not always appreciated by their teachers. This is not only the case with ‘native-speaker’ teachers. In Tong’s study (cited above) it is the discourse of Confucianism among Hong Kong teachers which presents the culturist notion that Hong Kong students cannot behave in certain ways. On the other hand, these [page 124 ends here] studies go some way to fulfilling the disciplines listed within approach C by employing a qualitative methodology which helps

³ There is of course the element of students discovering aspects of their own autonomy, which could be new to them in the unfamiliar business of language learning; but I am more concerned here with how teachers discover it

the researcher look directly at student behaviour and attitudes. Hayagoshi's and Chang's studies, and my own of Japanese classroom fragments (all cited above) are very small; but the value of such qualitative studies of individual instances of social action is very gradually to build a picture sufficient to throw doubt on existing discourses. The interpretive paradigm insists that one allows meaning to emerge from direct observation while putting aside, or bracketing, taken-for-granted and essentialist notions of the foreign Other (Baumann, 1996: 2; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 40; Holliday, 2002: 185), and that the researcher must state her ideology (Janesick, 1994: 212; Holliday, 2002: 53). I try to do this explicitly in my study of Hong Kong students (cited above), where I state that, as someone brought up in native-speakerism, "I bring with me a discorsal baggage" which "is pre-occupied with a 'learner autonomy' that resides in a certain type of oral participation in the classroom" and "tends to explain the behaviour" of the students "by reducing them to prescribed, 'culturist' national or regional cultural stereotypes" (Holliday, 2001b: 124). Also, that:

This involves trying to see the Hong Kong students first and foremost as university students rather than 'Chinese' Whether or not 'Chinese culture' has anything to do with what I observe is thus something to be discovered last rather than considered first. (ibid.)

Thus, the research has a major moral objective of recognising and dealing with my own prejudices and representing the students from Hong Kong as rounded, fully and naturally autonomous human beings.

Changing ideologies

The native-speakerist discourse of TESOL is complex and deep, and is within all of us - from the English speaking West or elsewhere - who have been brought up in its tradition, whether we are critical of it or not. I feel that the straight 'us'-'them' view of native-speakerism is slowly becoming a thing of the past as the ownership of English changes and we begin to appreciate more the worlds of others. When reading recent papers on the issue of autonomy, I see that there is indeed a clear movement towards writers taking care not to Other their students. Many use sensitive phrases which acknowledge what students from different backgrounds bring with them, such as "to support autonomy" (Pemberton et al., 2001: 23), **[page 125 ends here]** "promoting autonomy" (Carter, 2001: 26), "capacity for autonomy" (Lai, 2001: 35), and "engagement of their autonomy" (Champagne et al, 2001: 45), much of which is within a "discourse of advising" (Pemberton et al., 2001: 24). Nevertheless, I feel that the struggle must go on - to see our students more generously as people and not as confined either to culturist stereotypes or to teacherly constructs of the 'learner' located within 'our' teacher-created activities. Because racism and culturism pervade all aspects of all our societies, we must look more deeply into the values of our ordinary professionalism, and struggle not so much to build systems for ourselves, but to understand others.

Reflection and discussion questions

1. Try and establish in your mind that all descriptions you have heard about national cultures are nothing but groundless rumours. Try not to think of your students as Chinese, Japanese, Iranian, etc. How does this change your vision of the behaviour of your students?
2. Think of examples of sexism, racism and culturism. How are these concepts similar? Why might a woman teacher prefer you not to explain her shortcomings in the classroom in terms of her gender? What does this have to do with culturism?
3. If you are from the English speaking West, how would you feel if you heard a Japanese person saying this to her colleague about you?: “We can’t expect her to collaborate with the other students because she comes from an individualist culture. We will have to let her work on her own rather than asking her to do pair work.” If you are not from the English speaking West, try to imagine a corresponding situation involving yourself. **[page 126 ends here]**

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