Ethnography and autoethnography in ELT research: Querying the axiomatic

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Abstract

With a view to suggesting ways forward in qualitative ELT research, this chapter surveys two related fields of literature in order to question the taken-for-granted. The first field reviewed is ethnography, and here the focus on its intellectual history and what is argued to be its potential for an ongoing 'haunting' by a colonizing epistemology (way of knowing), ontology (way of being), and axiology (values system). To counter this threat, four inter-related strategies are suggested for how ethnographic research might be improved in ELT. These are, firstly, a rejection of putatively objective cultural models; secondly, problematizing the written conventions of ethnographic texts; thirdly, greater awareness of researcher positionality, and fourthly, taking a more robust ethical stance in which the purposes and beneficiaries of our research are foregrounded. The chapter then turns to autoethnography, which is the second field of literature reviewed. The genre is shown to be booming in both the research methods literature broadly and also, to a lesser extent, in ELT research specifically. But it is argued that the approaches taken to autoethnography in ELT are somewhat different from those taken in other disciplines, and it is posited that ELT autoethnographers may be ignoring one of the key tenets of autoethnography. While ELT autoethnographers seem *au fait* with the evocative nature of storytelling and the situatedness of autoethnography in the wider, academic literature, it is argued that an explicit commitment to social justice may be lacking. The paper concludes by suggesting that, as ELT comprises many non-Western and non-hegemonic voices, it is necessary for the discipline to work towards decolonizing ethnographic scholarship in ways that allow for the needs and interested of 'the researched' to be served rather than (mainly) the needs of the researcher.

Keywords

ethnography, autoethnography, epistemology, ontology, culture, paradigm

Introduction

This chapter does not attempt to do justice to all the topics currently being debated in ethnography and autoethnography: this would be both an impossibly huge task and also likely too generalist. Instead, I consider where we are at, as a discipline, in our engagement with these research methods. In doing so, I aim to problematize the taken-for-granted from a perspective of decolonizing scholarship (e.g. Chawla & Atay, 2017). That is to say, I think we need to ask ourselves, as ELT scholars, some big questions about the research we do.

We might ask, for instance: *whose* way of knowing matters to us? What do we see as *normal*? *Whose* ways of being, and *whose* values, do we hold up as aspirational? And if we find, as we ask ourselves these things, that the questions make us uncomfortable, or if we simply realise that we don't normally ask ourselves such things, I want us to then ask ourselves about these silences or the uncomfortableness itself. Because it is these difficult spaces and these empty spaces that are really what this chapter is all about.

A great deal has been published on ethnography in the last eight years. Contributions include adjective-prefixed books such as *sensory ethnography* (Pink, 2015) and *critical ethnography* (Madison, 2012). There are books on fieldwork (e.g. Blommaert & Jie, 2010), writing (e.g. Jackson & Mazzei, 2009), and politics (e.g. Denzin & Giardina, 2015), including qualitative research's contested underpinnings (e.g. Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; Kovach, 2009).

Similarly, autoethnography is booming. Recent books include more adjective-noun titles: *evocative autoethnography* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016b), *interpretive autoethnography* (Denzin, 2014), *critical autoethnography* (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014), and *collaborative autoethnography* (Chang, Wambura Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012), for example. There are books offering ways forward in contentious areas, such as representational ethics (Spry, 2016), engagement with culture (Stanley & Vass, 2018), and intersections with feminist methods (Ettore, 2016). And, in 2013, the first handbook of autoethnography was published (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

And the above exemplifies only recent *books*. In addition, in the past four years, special issues of journals in myriad disciplines have been dedicated to autoethnography, and plenty of stand-alone articles and book chapters have appeared. This contrasts markedly with the previous twenty years, in which autoethnography was considered peripheral and was, at times, roundly disparaged (e.g. Delamont, 2007).

It is also important to say that the above speaks only to those publications in English and those written in and of the western, academic Centre. But autoethnography is also alive and well in, for example, Mexico (e.g. Aguirre-Armendáriz & Gil-Juárez, 2015; Bénard Calva, 2014). In short, then, there is a lot going on in the research methods literature in terms of both ethnography and autoethnography. These are exciting times.

Within ELT in particular, both methods have made significant contributions too, especially in areas such as teacher and learner identity, agency, and gender, to name only a few. These have generally taken critical perspectives and have in common their underpinning interpretivist epistemological paradigm.

But ubiquity and acceptability are not innocence, and this is what I want to problematise in this chapter. Ethnography has a chequered past and a potentially problematic present: its epistemology, axiology, and ontology may be at odds with the ways and values of our discipline (e.g. Crookes, 2009). For this reason, in the first section that follows I discuss ethnography in terms of its roots, its shoots, and its cahoots, by which I mean the sometimes-questionable company it keeps. In doing so, I posit that there is a need for greater interrogation of taken-for-granted assumptions.

I then turn to autoethnography, and in the second section I consider the ways in which autoethnography seems to be nativising within our discipline. I deliberately use the middle voice (*it is nativising*, not we are *nativising it* or *it is being nativised*; Dreyfus, 2017) so as not to apportion blame for the possibility that, as a discipline, I think we may be misinterpreting what autoethnography is and what it is for. Certainly, autoethnography is still quite new in language education research, and may be presented as a radical methodological departure (e.g. Méndez, 2013; Mirhosseini, 2016). This may help explain why ELT autoethnographies differ from those in other disciplines. This is not necessarily a problem, as it is the nature of the academy that terminology tends towards polysemy. But as autoethnography begins its long march through the disciplines, I raise the possibility that there seem to have been some misreadings of its intentions within ELT. For this reason, in the second part of the chapter, I ask: are we taking autoethnography in the spirit in which it is intended and in which it is elsewhere conceived?

Roots, shoots, and cahoots: On ethnography

Etymologically, ethnography is the writing (*grapho*, the ancient Greek verb *to write*) of people (*ethos*) (McCarty, 2015, p.29). But the putative neutrality of *writing about people* (*ibid*), or *writing culture* conceals ethnography's troubled past and, arguably, its present-day problematic positionality.

Ethnography has its early roots in the descriptive accounts of 'missionaries, settlers, colonial officials, and the like' (Pratt, 1986, p.27), from which ethnographers have long tried to distinguish themselves. In common with missionaries' and colonizers' accounts, though, ethnography centred (and arguably still, now centres) the '"seeing man"…he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess' (Pratt, 2008, p.9). That is to say, ethnography was borne of colonial subjectivity and of a colonizing mindset in which the Western gaze described, classified, judged, and reduced the exoticised Other. For this reason, Erickson (2018) revisits the usual denotative translation (of *ethos,* or *ethnoi,* as 'people'), instead proposing the more nuanced 'people who were not Greek', noting that '[t]he Greeks were more than a little xenophobic, so that *ethnoi* carries pejorative implications' (p.39). Given the way ethnography has historically been undertaken, this connotative translation makes more sense.

Leeds-Hurwitz (2013), sketches the early 20th century anthropologists who travelled the world to research mainly so-called primitive cultures in ways that they thought were objective. Such writing sought to hypothesize about and uncover the 'truth' of a given way of life, necessarily rooted in a positivist epistemological stance and a discourse that 'construe[d] the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest' (Bhabha, 1996, p.92). Within this paradigm, ethnography was a putative 'scientific' endeavour, a philosophy of science akin to 'social physics' that sought to uncover Humean causality and general laws of social processes (Erickson, 2018) within cultures conceived as 'fixed, unitary, and bounded' (McCarty, 2015, p.24). This implied, and is implied by, the notion of a genealogy of cultures along a modernist continuum of so-called development, with 'Indigenous Peoples at the bottom of the racial hierarchy; primitive and the missing link in the "puzzle of mankind"…[and] Western Peoples…as the epitome of civilized man" (Bishop, 2017, p.3).

The cultures studied by the early twentieth century anthropologists, including Bronisław Malinowski (d.1942), Franz Boas (d.1942), Margaret Mead (d.1978), and Ruth Benedict (d.1948), included research on (rather than 'with' or 'among') the First Peoples of Canada's Baffin Island, the Trobrian Islanders of Papua New Guinea, Samoans, and Native Americans. These choices matter because all were non-Western cultures. Although Boas, and later Mead, came to refute the racism underlying early models of ethnography, shifting the focus to societies' internal coherence and coming to rely on the notion of cultural relativism (McCarty, 2015), ethnography remained part of the 'colonial discourse' and its 'apparatus of power' (Bhabha, 1996, p.92). The turn to cultural relativism meant that instead of holding all cultures to a universal standard (e.g. of 'development'), societies were, at least in theory, understood and judged through lenses of their *own* meaningfulness. Theoretical concepts underpinning this work included 'national character', which was described in order to understand and predict behaviour, assuming that 'everyone in a particular nation shares certain core characteristics' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013, p.24). This relies on an assumption of homogeneity within a given culture and implies structural determinism and the near absence of individual agency. But for all that cultural relativism was theorized, the research was consumed (and, arguably, also produced) in ways that nevertheless compared and classified cultures in order to explain and justify European and North American settler societies' global dominance. (Seemingly, the facts of colonization, exploitation, and slavery had escaped notice as more plausible explanations for putative western superiority.)

For some, though, this conceptualization and seeming legitimization of scientistic ethnography has never gone away. This includes ethnography both within the academy and also outside, such as in documentary filmmaking. As I write, in November 2017, the (UK's) *Telegraph* newspaper is running a headline that reports: "British explorer Benedict Allen 'goes missing in jungle' while searching for lost tribe" (Henderson, 2017). Peppered with colonial-era tropes, the 'researched', the Yaifo people, are labelled a 'lost tribe', and Allen describes his purpose as 'to create a brief record of their lives'. In other words, he is doing an ethnography 'of them'.

Only Allen has agency in the *Telegraph's* narrative. In contrast to the 'researched', Allen is 'a very experienced explorer' whose 'daring expeditions' involve 'a hard hike up through rather treacherous terrain', 'paddl[ing] down river for a week or so', and '"just like the good old days" [not taking] a satellite phone, GPS or a travelling companion' (all quotes from Henderson, 2017). This discourse seems to be lifted straight from colonial-era narratives in which 'British masculinity …is constituted in the geography of adventure' (Phillips, 2013, p.55) comprising 'fearless endeavour in a world populated by savage races, dangerous pirates, and related manifestations of the other' to be encountered on voyages to dark and unexplored continents' (Bristow, 2015, p.1). The photograph accompanying the *Telegraph* article is similarly evocative of Britain's colonial past. Of it, Hirsch (2017) writes:

> The [*Telegraph*] saw fit to illustrate the story with a remarkable photo of Allen… surrounded by four men with black skin, eyes glowering, wearing traditional costumes, including head and face gear. To remove any doubt that this was meant to be interpreted as a threatening scene, the Yaifo people of Papua New Guinea were described in the story as "quite a scary bunch" and their vocation as "headhunters".

In some ways, then, ethnography's past is still present. While Allen was adventuring in the name of making a BBC documentary, some ELT researchers may still imagine that their ethnographies can be 'neutral, tropeless discourse that would render other realities "exactly as they are", not filtered through our own values and interpretive schema' (Pratt, 1986, p.27).

But this is impossible. And interpretivism is why different researchers may see and record the same thing in very different ways. The historical Redfield-Lewis case illustrates this point: two researchers set out, one in the 1920s and the other in the 1940s, to do fieldwork in/on the same Mexican village. But their accounts, separated by 17 years, came to the opposite conclusions. Assuming that the village of Tepoztlán had not changed beyond recognition between their visits, Erickson (2018, p.48) asks, 'Do the perspective, politics, and ideology of the observer so powerfully influence what he or she notices and reflects on that it overdetermined the conclusions drawn?' Well, yes. Maclure & Stronach (1993), illustrate a similar case in two texts they call 'Jack in two boxes'. Jack is a primary school head-teacher about whom parallel texts were written by different researchers *drawing on the same interview data*. The two texts show different emphases, different content and, ultimately, different findings. The fact that, *even given identical data*, ethnographic accounts can differ so radically suggests that, in ethnography, objectivity is impossible.

However, assumptions about seemingly objective ways of knowing and also about 'national character' and other legacies of early ethnography were 'assumed to be reasonable until surprisingly recently by the vast majority of researchers' (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013, p.29). Indeed, the single most widely cited source in social science (Jones & Alony, 2007) remains Hofstede's (1991/2005) theory of 'cultural dimensions', which lies wholly within this tradition of supposedly 'objective' cultural research aimed at describing and classifying national characteristics that are then compared to those of other 'cultures' (i.e. nations, although these are unlikely to comprise homogenous, bounded, or meaningful 'cultures'). This is problematic because it:

> [P]roject[s] concepts of a culturally superior Centre-Western Self and an inferior Other onto the rest of the world, and . . . represents a discourse of political interference – a mandate for correcting and changing the imagined indolence of the cultures of the East and the South. (Holliday, 2009, p.148)

This is why Moon (2013) strongly critiques this kind of research as 'a tool of imperialism' that is 'infused with a colonial purpose' (p.35), while Ono (2013) critiques the tendency of the literature to homogenize the 'diversity of ideas, opinions, lifestyles, and behaviours' found across all nations, problematizing this as a practice that 'serves to reify notions of difference and commonality' (p.88).

But, surely, we, nice liberals in a 'nice field like TESOL' (Kubota, 2002, p.84) would never fall into this kind of lazy stereotyping when thinking about those we deem Others, would we? Actually, it seems we do. While the Othering ELT undertakes is not mainly about so-called primitive cultures, our tendency to characterize and reduce in problematic ways has been critiqued, for example, in the ways in which cultural/racial Others are discussed in classroom discourses (e.g. Lee, 2015; Chun, 2016), teacher discourses (e.g. Romai & Lammervo, 2017; Riley, 2015), discursive constructions of international university students (e.g. Phan, 2017; Tran & Vu, 2017), and binarizing, homogenizing, and reduction of non-native *and* native speaker teachers (e.g. Aneja, 2016; Liz Ellis 2016; Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

This has four important implications for ethnographic research in ELT. The first is that we need, as a discipline, to question the way we draw upon putatively objective research about linguacultural identities and the theoretical frameworks drawn from these studies. Critically interrogating our usages of frameworks like Hofstede's 'cultural dimensions' would be a good starting point, as would adopting Pennycook's (2001) 'problematizing practice' stance towards critical engagement. This means that, rather than establishing *a priori* how power works in a given setting and risking structural determinism of judging (perhaps even in advance and from the outside) who has power and who doesn't, and critiquing accordingly, one should instead *do* criticality. Thus:

> [R]ather than assuming that the speaker is already marginalized as a member of [a given group of people] and looking for signs of that marginalization in the speech, this approach seeks a broader understanding of how multiple discourses may be in play at the same time. What kinds of discursive positions does the speaker take up? How does the speaker position herself or himself, and how may they also be positioned at different moments according to gendered and cultural positionings? (Pennycook, 2001, p.44)

A second implication is that we must carefully examine our language and voice (Nunan & Choi, 2011) when we report ethnography. Linguistic sleights of hand like 'the study found' and the passive voice in which the research seemingly conducted itself are weasel words borne of the persistent a myth that ethnographic writing is, or should be, or *can* be, neutral, objective, and factual. It cannot. The writing of culture is very much a *positioned* activity, in which the researcher is far from neutral. We are all, as human beings, a product of our *own* ontological, epistemological, and axiological paradigms. As I have written elsewhere:

> We don't see things as they are. We see things as *we* are. When I first started writing, I thought I was capturing fact, pinning it down on the page and holding it still, butterfly-like. Now, I realise my texts say as much about me, the storyteller, as they do about the story. And so rather than hiding (behind) the elusive, illusive pursuit of truth, I'm embracing the fact of my fiction. All writing is a creative process. Like creative non-fiction –in whose handle is flaunted the putative oxymoron of the creative along with the factual– academic writing is a textual creation. It is a storied re-telling, a construction, a *fiction*[.] (Stanley, 2017, p. 38)

This is ‘fiction’ in the sense that Borges (1944) uses the term. In Borges’s short story *Funes El Memorioso* (‘Funes, the memory man’), the central character suffers a fall from his horse and a blow to the head and, as a result, is cursed with the ‘perfect’ memory in which nothing is filtered. In contrast, most ‘factual’ accounts are actually ‘gross and arbitrary reduction[s] of the world’ (Bell, 2007, p.124). In ‘storying’ experience, we necessarily select some elements and discard others, telling a story and drawing conclusions that are as much fiction as fact.

And part of the construction is *representation*: how we portray ourselves and others in our storied retellings. Issues of representation apply whether researchers are mainly outsiders or mainly insiders, and the question of researchers’ own paradigms and positionality relative to those of ‘the researched’ is the third implication for ELT researchers. This is to say that even as we may hope to write in emic ways, from the inside, as researchers, we are *always* outsiders to some extent. Outsiderness is sometimes very obviously the case, for instance if a researcher hopes to conduct an ethnography of Korean ESL students but is not, herself, a Korean ESL student. However, even when the researcher *does* enjoy seeming insiderness along one or more axis of identity, there are still potential problems in fieldwork and representational ethics. This is because identity is intersectional, and there will inevitably be identity axes along which the researcher is an outsider. Sultana (2007, pp.378-379) illustrates this problem in her research among rural Bangladeshi women. She, herself, is Bangladeshi and speaks her participants’ dialects. But she is still an outsider: she is from Dhaka, based in the UK, literate, and was undertaking a research project. She is different socio-economically from her participants and she looks different, too. This mattered:

> The fact that I wore shoes, a watch, carried a notebook, had a camera, all placed me in an irreconcilable position of difference. What perhaps generated most interest though was my short hair. …My shoes were another spectacle, as I wore sneakers (for my back and foot pain); such shoes are rarely worn by women, even in the city, and such masculine footwear made me an object of scrutiny and fun. Children would point to them and ask why I wore men’s shoes.

A similar reflection is provided by Siganporia (2018, p.123), an Indian musician and musicologist researching among Tibetan musicians in exile in India. She walks the line between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ research, coining the humorous portmanteau ‘emetic’ (medically, this is a substance causing vomiting, and it describes the sheer difficulty of positionality). Siganporia notes that her own framing paradigms necessarily inform the ways in which she engages with, understands, and ultimately represents her exiled, Tibetan participants, even though they accept her as an ally.

To some extent, too, researchers can *perform* insiderness, for example by appealing to similarities and downplaying differences. But rather than hoping to *negate* or get beyond outsiderness along one or more axes of identity, researchers should, I think, *manage* their own positionality through reflexivity. This includes be(com)ing aware of one’s own paradigm and its difference from the many other epistemological, ontological, and axiological paradigms that might exist.

An example is Western academia, in which powerful norms and unwritten rules govern, and towards the acceptance and reproduction of which would-be practitioners are socialized (e.g. Gopaul, 2011). By way of illustration, Australian author Robert Dessaix (1994, p.62), who was a rare, non-Soviet literature student at Moscow University in 1966, describes the nature of that paradigm, pointing out that the system there then was no more constructed or arbitrary than any other, *including that of Western academia*:

> In 1966, Dostoevsky had only just been rehabilitated and for the first time since the early years of the Revolution it was possible to discuss Doestoevsky’s Christianity and novels like *The Devils* freely. I say ‘freely’, but I don’t mean by this that all was permitted. In our weekly tutorials with Mr Tiunkin, a frightened rabbit of a man,

> terrified the Australian in his class might suddenly come out with a heresy he'd then have to deal with, we'd begin with a short lecture[.]…Then the class would have what was called a debate. Tiunkin would announce a proposition (for example, 'the figure of Raskolnikov [from *Crime and Punishment*] is anti-revolutionary'), appoint one student to defend it and one to oppose it, and then at the end of the tutorial he, Tiunkin, would tell us who was right and who was wrong and why. It was freedom of sorts. The class paper we had to write was less 'free': it had to be couched in strictly Marxist literary terms and the bibliography had to begin with the letter L for Lenin, then go onto M for Marx, E for Engels, and only then onto A, B, etc. No one minded or thought it odd. We were just giving unto Caesar. Much the same thing happens today in Australian tertiary institutions, after all, where, if not in the bibliography at least in the text, we find the obligatory mention of Kristeva, Said, Foucault, Lacan, Irigaray. We just have a wider range of orthodoxies struggling for dominance here—and the public's indifference to all of them is not concealed, just ignored.

Our paradigms, then, informed by our place, positioning, and time, frame our discourses and our thinking about what is 'normal'. It is therefore problematic to claim, of any research, that it can free itself from the baggage of its place, time, and the individual(s) who created it.

All research and all researchers are products of positioning. This is to say that when Malinowski and others went to live among those they deemed cultural others, for the purposes of their own research (and their careers, and their own learning, and so on), this was far from a neutral thing to be doing. The enlightenment-era 'scientific' practices they used, and the way they wrote up their studies were also very much positional, paradigm-bound activities. Similarly, Koro-Ljungberg (2016, p.79) writes:

> Methodologies are choices, often onto-epistemological and theoretical, and cannot be divorced from the values, beliefs, backgrounds, bodies, and affects of the researcher or the research context. Methodologies …have power to disempower, empower, and validate and invalidate experiences, data, lives, and material.

Sufficient awareness of researchers' own paradigms, positionalities, and identities, both in and of themselves but also as they relate to those of 'the researched', is thus the third implication for ELT researchers.

The fourth, related, implication is about our own purpose in doing the research. ELT is currently undergoing a powerful critical turn (see Morgan, this volume), rightfully questioning the way power operates in English language education and hoping to play some role in overturning structural unfairness and oppression. Within this, research methods may seem to be rather more 'neutral': practices, findings, and writing may seem to be 'beyond' the political. But they are not.

Research methods are inherently political (e.g. Denzin & Giardina, 2015), with ethnography haunted by its past and its paradigms. This is Derrida's '*hauntology'*, a portmanteau of 'haunting' and 'ontology' (Buse & Scott, 1999). Ethnography is a practice borne of a particular set of assumptions about the nature of human societies, the nature of knowledge, and the ways in which one should properly, ethically behave. And these assumptions are firmly based in Western ontology, epistemology and axiology. This is problematic for ELT researchers whose research contexts and participants are very likely not Western. As Michelle Bishop (2017, pp.7-8) writes, compellingly and importantly, of being an Australian Indigenous woman and also a university-based researcher:

> [There are] many reasons influencing researchers' method choices, including: expectations of the academy; funding requirements; journal constraints; and ideological factors, [but] for me it is a cultural imperative that I utilize Indigenous methodologies. Too often we are forced to work within Western frameworks and expected to operate using the tools of our oppressors. …by using such qualitative

> methodologies instead of Indigenous methodologies, I feel I would be undermining my axiology, ontology, and epistemology, and effectively endorsing colonial practices. For these reasons, I feel a profound sense of obligation to 'walk my talk'. …[I use Indigenous autoethnography] rather than relying on Western knowledges and paradigms to provide 'proof'.

That ethnography is neither neutral nor universal is, of course, just as true of any other way of knowing: all are borne of specific discourses and paradigms. But as ethnography's assumptions trouble Bishop, might they also trouble the non-Western (or non-academic? Or non-ELT?) 'researched' in ELT research contexts? I suspect they might.

What I am critiquing, then, is the unproblematized projecting of the researcher's (or a discipline's) own ways onto the 'researched'. In this respect, ethnography still uncomfortably echoes the old, colonial depictions of cultural Others in that it imports ways of seeing, being, and doing to research contexts in which many of the participants do not share its paradigms. In doing ethical, worthwhile ethnography, we need to ask: to what extent is our research done *with* or *among* 'the researched', or are we doing research *to* or *on* 'them'? (This is, of course, not about what we *say* we are doing but how people *experience* what we are doing.)

A related question is: how do we represent 'the researched' in our texts? To what extent are these texts accessible to 'the researched' (whether in terms of paywall academic publishing or jargon-dense textual inaccessibility)? And where our texts *are* accessible, are they interesting and useful to those outside of the academy? Are we 'reading' and writing others through their *own* paradigms, their *own* values, their *own* ways, or through our own? Perhaps most broadly of all, we must ask: whose needs are being served in even doing the ethnography? As Suresh Canagarajah and I have noted previously:

> The core ethical question in all research is a simple but large one: what is the purpose of doing the study? While the honest (and practical) answer may be selfish—i.e., to get a PhD or to get published—it is to be hoped that researchers also have some greater benefit in mind. This may mean, ideally, benefit to the study participants themselves. (Canagarajah & Stanley, 2015, p.34)

Broad church or problematic polysemy? On autoethnography

One way of starting to address the issues raised above, of researchers' own positionalities and paradigms, is writing about ourselves and our own identities as these relate to the research we are conducting. For this reason —among other reasons— autoethnography is currently enjoying a boom in the academy in general and also within ELT and language education. (Although as Starfield (2013) points out, the genre is yet to be fully accepted in ELT journals, with most autoethnographic writing still appearing mainly in *Forum*-type spaces rather than as full articles.)

Recent autoethnographic texts (whether or not labelled 'autoethnographic') have appeared in language education on, for example, the creation of 'a multivocal self' (Choi, 2017), language use in 'unexpected places' (Pennycook, 2012), perceptions of EFL teachers' professional identities, legitimacy, and employability (e.g. Canagarajah, 2012b; Iams, 2016; Jee, 2016), privilege (Vandrick, 2009), the re-inscribing of racialized hierarchies through a Spanish-language program (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), lived experiences of language policy and planning (Khanam, 2016), the alienation of a Polish academic forced to publish in English (Szwabowski, 2017), and first-person accounts of informal language learning of Japanese (Casanave, 2012; Simon-Maeda, 2011), Spanish (Stanley, 2015), Chinese (McDonald, 2011), and Korean (Jenks, 2017). In addition, a handful of edited volumes of autoethnographic-style texts have appeared in ELT (e.g. Belcher & Connor, 2001; Casanave & Li, 2008; Nunan & Choi, 2010).

One characteristic of autoethnography is its distinctive writing style, and Ron Pelias (2013, p.389) exhorts would-be autoethnographers to:

> Write from the heart of your humanity, be honest, and self-reflexive, recognize the risks for yourself and others in your constructions, allow your body to have a speaking presence, and create a better, more ethical world.

This style of writing echoes the *purpose* of autoethnography, which is to use the personal (the 'auto') to provide insights into wider cultural phenomena (the 'ethno'), particularly those otherwise hidden aspects of life that are all but impossible to research using other methods.

Autoethnography then, at an epistemological level, is about 'creat[ing] verisimilitude rather than making hard truth claims' (Grant, 2010, p.578). But in the (worthwhile) pursuit of insightful engagement with lived experience, autoethnography can easily be critiqued: memory is flawed, experience is subjective, texts are constructed, and narratives are performances of our chosen versions of ourselves.

Additionally, the telling of experience can be rather *too* telling. For instance, when Carolyn Ellis (2004, p.349) recounts toasting her decision to buy a new Mercedes sports car with her fellow-academic partner Art Bochner, there is verisimilitude and insight but also telling glimpses of heteronormativity and materialism (Learmonth & Humphrey, 2011). While autoethnographic writing may be evocative of lived experience and while it may offer unique insights borne of first-person accounts, there may also be a shortage of critical, analytical engagement with normativity, positionality, and partiality and this, in turn, may result in a questioning of its academic legitimacy.

However, the goal is not 'truth' in a positivistic sense, or even a conditional, contextualized critical realism in the Bhaksarian sense (e.g. Fletcher, 2017). Instead:

> Autoethnographers …recognize how what we understand and refer to as 'truth' changes as the genre of writing or representing experience changes. …Moreover, we acknowledge the importance of contingency. We know that memory is fallible, that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt; and we recognize that people who have experienced the 'same' event often tell different stories about what happened[.] …For an autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's credibility. Could the narrator have had the experiences described, given available 'factual evidence'? Does the narrator believe that this is actually what happened to her or him? …Closely related to reliability are issues of validity. For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible …[Citing Plummer] 'What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller—to see the world from her or his point of view…' …An autoethnography can also be judged in terms of whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offer a way to improve the lives of participants …In particular, autoethnographers ask: 'How useful is the story?' and 'To what uses might the story be put?' (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p.3)

Anderson (2006, p.387) goes further, suggesting the following evaluative criterion for what he terms *analytic* autoethnography:

> [T]he defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. This data-transcending goal has been a central warrant for traditional social science research. ... this means using empirical evidence to formulate and refine theoretical understandings of social processes. ...Analytic ethnographers are not content with accomplishing the representational task of capturing 'what is going on'.

Together, these are very different evaluative criteria than those used for most scholarly writing. However, it is important to note that, in suggesting that we hold autoethnography to a *different* set of standards, I am not suggesting those standards be *lesser*.

Appropriately, this is best illustrated autoethnographically, through a story. I recently co-edited *Questions of Culture in Autoethnography* (Stanley & Vass, 2018) and discovered, not least from long editorial discussions about papers we rejected, that there are at least three ways in which would-be-authors can do autoethnography badly. Here, then, are three problem areas that Greg Vass and I identified in texts purporting to be autoethnography. From these, I inductively identify a set of evaluation criteria for autoethnography (but see also Schroeder, 2017 and Le Roux, 2017 for more complete sets of evaluation criteria).

First, not all would-be autoethnographers can tell an engaging story in which they situate the self and the lived experience; it is simply not that easy (especially for academics?) to spin a yarn. The seeming freedom of 'writing from the heart' may appear as an opportunity to rant rather than to narrate, and some of the writing submitted and ultimately rejected from the book read like angry opinion pieces in the 'comments' section of an online newspaper. This is simply not what autoethnography is. Related, another issue (and a different rejected submission) was writing that looked, on the surface, like autoethnography: full of punchy slogans about writing from the heart and vague statements about how the writer was feeling. But this type of writing seemed to be, at best, a form of writing-as-therapy. Now, although the political is never far from the autoethnographic and there are few things quite as theoretical as a good story, 'personal' writing does not mean simply grinding an axe of opinion. And nor does the vague writing of fleeting feelings and cribbed soundbites constitute autoethnography. As with any other ethnographic method, there is a need to ground interpretations and inductive theorising in meaningful data, thickly described.

Second, any individual's so-called 'personal' narrative is necessarily situated. (Indeed, the very notion of the 'individual' self is a situated, Western ontological position that is far from universal; Iosefo, 2018). This is particularly relevant in ELT, of course, as ours is a transnational, plurilingual, multicultural/intercultural discipline, conceptually located in a globalizing/globalized context of uneven, postcolonial power relations. When one writes one's 'own' story, there is a need to draw on the surrounding sociocultural literature for conceptual and political context. To ignore this is poor scholarship, as the autoethnographic explicitly links the personal to the 'cultural'. In this sense, it is a very different genre from autobiography, memoir, or creative non-fiction. For this reason, in his account of a young Tamil carwash attendant's refusal to engage in a Tamil-language conversation in Canada, Canagarajah (2010, p.43) is careful to provide the surrounding sociocultural details that enable readers to make sense of the story. He writes:

> My use of the honorific Annai wasn't enough to neutralize the many sources of inequality in the encounter. Perched high on my seat in an imposing SUV with an American license plate, I was literally looking down at him standing humbly with his mop and hose. …The situation was too unequal for him to enjoy community. …This [Tamil, diasporic] community, bound together by its common aspirations, was itself riven by internal differences and conflicts. …These tensions were certainly already there in Sri Lanka, but I hadn't had the eyes to see them. …Perhaps because the Tamil community in Sri Lanka was tightly structured around a certain hierarchy of values and distribution of resources for such a long time, we had taken them for granted for generations[.] …[But in exile,] the subtle tensions in our community had begun to open up deep fissures.

In contrast, some of the writing we reviewed for *Questions of Culture in Autoethnography* told personal stories that were almost entirely decontextualized. Autoethnography is very much scholarship rather than personal writing. The difference from other forms of academic writing is that individual experience is foregrounded, not that the contextual does not matter.

The third and perhaps most contentious criterion is that autoethnography has an overt political agenda: it seeks to right ethical wrongs. This is what Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) mean when they ask 'How useful is the story?' and 'To what uses might the story be put?' An autoethnography may be both compelling to read and well contextualised in the literature, but if it doesn't work towards making the world a better place, it is not legitimate. (This is of course immediately problematic, particularly in our politically polarised times and also with an awareness of the potentially deleterious effects of good intentions; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016. But this is a much larger discussion for a separate paper.) This then connects back to the question I posed at the end of the previous section, which is: whose needs and interests are served by our research? In this sense autoethnography is necessarily an activist, change-oriented methodology that seeks to problematize taken-for-granted Western canonical knowledges and empower other ways of knowing, being, and doing. An example is provided by Bright (2018, pp.33-34), writing about his experiences as a native-speaker teacher of English:

> Sometime during my first year in Vietnam I was told that Vietnamese people couldn't tell the difference between the colours blue and green, with the Vietnamese language having just a single word for both colours: *màu xanh*. I was told and I believed this. It was the result, I think now, of a kind of popularised trickling-down of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis …And I suspect that it was popular and that it did trickle down because it suggested to *us* a reassuring kind of incompetence on the part of *them;* the satisfying superiority of our perceptions and our comprehension of a world that was not, despite what we wanted to believe, ours. Our colours, our words, better than their colours and words. Our words better corresponding with things in the world, with the effect of making us believe that things in the world were ours. Call it what it is, this 'ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' [citing Said]: Orientalism, Colonialism, Imperialism, Racism.
>
> And, of course, it's not even really true. And not only in terms of linguistic relativity but also just simple vocabulary. There is, in *Tiếng Việt,* the Vietnamese language, *màu xanh lá cây* (the blue-green of leaves) and *màu xanh nước biển,* (the blue-green of the ocean) and *màu xanh da trời* (the blue-green of the sky) and so on, a way of distinguishing blue and green in language that, it turns out, while different from English colour terminology, is common to many of the world's non-English languages …Is this ironic, that it also turns out that rather than being about their inability to name colours properly, this was much more about *our* inability to imagine *them* thinking and naming colours in a different, but no less effective, way to our own?

To me, this autoethnography ticks all three boxes. Bright's storytelling is vivid; his prose lucid. The account is grounded in a contextualising literature that explains what is going on at a theoretical level. And, crucially, the text as a whole works towards righting the wrongs of 'Orientalism, Colonialism, Imperialism, Racism'.

But my concern with some autoethnography in ELT is that we may not be there yet: are we ticking all the boxes? While our autoethnographies may tell good stories (criterion 1) and be grounded in the contextualizing literature (criterion 2), I question the extent to which we are sufficiently committed to a transformative, social justice agenda (criterion 3). As Kubota (2002) has pointed out, in our 'nice', liberal discipline we tend to deny rather than explicitly critique the problematics of power and privilege. And so, while we are starting to *do* criticality as a norm rather than as an exception, we may not be taking this far enough in ELT autoethnography.

As Paltridge, Starfield and Tardy (2016) have noted 'the chief proponent of autoethnography in writing research thus far has been Canagarajah', we might expect Canagarajah, at least, to be ticking all three boxes, writing autoethnography as it is conceived in the qualitative methods literature. But this does not appear to be the case. Although Canagarajah's (2010) chapter, described above, shows great awareness of power relations within the Tamil migrant community, he nevertheless titles the chapter 'achieving community', writing that:

> Underprivileged Tamils don't dislike community. They are keeping their options open to shuttle between communities and construct bonding groups as suits their needs, interests, and situations. Rather than letting conventional forms of identities and values restrict their mobility and creativity, they are forming communities on their own initiative and on their own terms. … Rather than being chosen by a community, they choose their communities (p. 48).

This seems, on the surface, accepting of individual agency and intersectionality. However, Canagarajah implicitly positions such 'shuttlers' and 'choosers', those with a 'floating identity' (p.45) and 'liminal communities' (p.45), as lesser. His research is on 'language maintenance in the Sri Lankan Tamil community' (p.41), which positions as axiomatic two ideas: that language maintenance is a good thing and that migrant Tamils are a 'community'. Indeed, despite questioning the fixity of lingua-ethnic identity as the basis for 'community' (2010), Canagarajah has subsequently published extensively on migrant Tamil-language maintenance: as a strategic performance of identity (2012a) and as a response to Tamil elders' concerns about heritage language loss (2013), for example. By implication, then, he constructs those 'fellow community member[s]' (2010, p.41) who 'refuse to bond' in Tamil (p.41) as doubly problematic.

It is certainly the case that, in his autoethnographic text, Canagarajah (2010) acknowledges vast power differences in caste, class, and education between earlier, professional Tamil migrants (like himself and the 'community families' he interviews) and the later refugee/undocumented arrivals. The problem is that, as a researcher, he is invested in the former group: those who would 'achieve community' along lingua-ethnic Tamil lines. This alignment sidelines those lower caste, disenfranchised Tamil migrants who may understandably prefer 'to dissociate themselves from the language and community that had once discriminated against them' (p.43). Canagarajah's text, then, compounds rather than challenging pre-existing unequal power relations. For this reason, it may be necessary to question the extent to which his contribution engages with the social justice activism that the autoethnographic methodology requires.

This is to say that, although autoethnography is starting to appear in ELT, even our 'chief proponent' seems to be missing one of the methodology's main tenets. Part of the issue may be that there has, to date, been little cross-pollination between autoethnography in ELT and autoethnography as conducted in other disciplines and in the research methods literature. A few ELT scholars are starting to engage across this divide (e.g. Choi, 2017; Stanley & Vass, 2018), but it seems we have rather a long way to go.

Conclusion

The two sections of this paper, taken together, constitute a problematizing of the axiomatic in ethnography, including autoethnography, as these research practices are undertaken in ELT. At issues is the decolonizing of scholarship (e.g. Chawla & Atay, 2017): *whose* way of knowing is privileged and normative? *Whose* ways of being, and *whose* values, are prized? And, where these questions are not even asked, and these spaces not even contested, is this evidence of a wider epistemological, axiological, and/or ontological violence (despite what we may tell ourselves about the liberal 'niceness' of our discipline)?

In the first section, I reviewed and problematized ethnography's historical baggage, concluding with four implications for ethnographers in ELT. My conclusions are as follows: we must question our use of scholarship derived from questionable academic practices. We must problematize the 'voice' in the ethnographic texts we produce. We must be aware of our own paradigm (and its inherent, non-neutral epistemology, ontology and axiology) as we seek to understand our own positionality, power, and status relative to those of 'the researched'. And we must ask ourselves whether our research mainly serves our own needs and interests, or those of 'the researched'.

This last point links into the second section of the paper, in which I reviewed autoethnography, noting that there seems to be a great deal of disparity in its *purpose*, and that some autoethnography within ELT is insufficiently oriented to questioning whose needs and interests served by research. Sometimes misconstrued as memoir or life-writing, or as the opportunity to rant in an opinion piece, autoethnography is, in fact, very clear in its agenda. It exists to allow for non-hegemonic (usually subaltern) ways of knowing and meaning-making to exist within the academy. This in itself has a social justice aim: to give voice to people and ideas that might otherwise be voiceless. But autoethnography also exists to redress social justice imbalances more broadly, and as autoethnography begins to appear in ELT we should be asking ourselves big, difficult questions about how to work in ways that are critical and decolonizing at the very deep levels of knowing, being, and values. Ours is a discipline made up of plenty of non-Western, non-privileged, and non-hegemonic voices, and it is my suggestion that, in undertaking auto/ethnography, we ask ourselves, as a discipline, how we might do research in ways that are more equitable than what has gone before.

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