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'Doing school': Cross cultural encounters

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Abstract: *In this paper, a series of vignettes is used to explore important current challenges in TESOL. These vignettes are drawn from many different settings, including Bengali-, Pahari- and Chinese-speaking children in UK primary schools, speakers of Aboriginal English in Australia and Chinese teachers of English on courses in Higher Education. A number of themes run through these different contexts: What counts as literacy and learning? What are the expectations of the students and, in the case of school children, their parents? How do these differ from those of their teachers? What power issues shape these expectations? In answering these questions, emphasis will be placed on the dangers of 'othering' and the importance of syncretic approaches that recognize and build on student experience.*

Keywords: *multilingualism, literacy, expectations, worldview*

Introduction

> "No, no! The adventures first, explanations take such a dreadful time."
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> *Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*
>
> "The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon."
>
> *Brandon Sanderson, The Way of Kings*

This paper is framed with two quotes – one from the classic British author, Lewis Carroll, the other from contemporary American author of science fiction and fantasy for young adults – in order to explain why, in an attempt to weave together these diverse threads of professional experience, I decided to harness the power of story. I should, however, stress that the stories that follow are not make-believe. They are based on real people and either personal experience or sound research.

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Same or different?

Every story has a beginning and mine started in Ferndale, a mining village in South Wales. Looking back on my childhood and adolescence, I am struck by the sense of community and the feeling we were all the same: we had a shared culture, a shared history. For instance, non-conformist chapels not only shaped the religious life of the community but served as a hub for a wide range of cultural activities. On reflection, however, not everyone was Protestant. When I was in school, Catholics were considered the lucky ones, excused from Assembly and left to their own devices in a nearby classroom where they could chat and finish homework. But other than that, we were all the same. Or were we?

On reflection, a few 'anomalies' stand out. Most of the Catholics, for instance, were second or third generation Irish or Italian. I remember John Cavaciuti who hated his name so much that, when he married Lyn Phillips, he changed his name to John Phillips. And how can I forget my best friend, Wirka Tuchli? Her mother was German and her father was Ukrainian. I remember someone shouting at her in a French class one day: "Your father is a Red!". Then there was Roseanne whose father was a Black American service man. And Lou Fai who came to our school from Hong Kong to live with his uncle in the Chinese laundry. There were also a few Deaf people: Nerissa's Dad, that old man Guto and Pat, the girl that went to a residential school. But other than that …

These spectres from my past are now old and faded. But are things so very different today?

Diverse worldviews in the school sector

Stories that underline these challenges abound in the school sector. Here are just a few.

Five on the first of December: schooling in East London

Liz Brooker, a researcher at the London University Institute of Education, charted the progress over their first year in school of two classmates, born on the first of December (Brooker, 2002). One of the boys, Troy, came from a working class English family. The other, Abdul Rahman, from a Bangladeshi family. The two families had very different ideas about literacy. Troy's parents considered reading a chore; his mother thought words were to be learned, not guessed at. Abdul Rahman's parents taught him rhymes, letters and numbers and literacy was very important in their daily lives. Most people would assume that Abdul Rahman

would have made most progress in the first year of school. The fact that it was Troy who did so raises some interesting questions.

When Troy started school, he was at an advantage quite simply because there was a better match between his previous experience and what was happening at school. He was familiar with the toys, the equipment and activities; he knew culturally appropriate strategies for making friends with children; and he demanded high levels of interaction with adults. His mother shared information with the school about family life and made constant requests for information about teaching and learning. Consequently, she was rapidly inducted into the school approach to literacy. At the end of the first year, Troy's reading was taking off: he was in the 'top group'.

Abdul Rahman, on the other hand, took time to settle. He made friends with other Bangladeshi boys, but he did not have many English-speaking friends. He did not make demands for adult interaction very often: he waited to be spoken to. Unlike Troy's mother, Abdul Rahman's mother did not exchange information with the teachers and knew very little about the school's approach to literacy. At the end of the first year in school, Abdul Rahman was in the middle group for reading.

In short, although neither of the boys matched the middle class norms of the school, there was much greater continuity between Troy's home experience and the school not least because Troy's mother was communicating regularly with the teachers. By the same token, it is not difficult to see how the lack of communication between school and Abdul Rahman's family played a part in him ending up lower in the school hierarchy of achievement.

So what has this to do with my childhood experiences? In both cases, the assumption of the dominant group is that everyone is the same. And this simply is not the case.

Travelling on parallel tracks: the case of Chinese children

Let me tell you another story based on a study of Mainland Chinese families' experiences of British education where a Chinese colleague interviewed the parents before and after a parent teacher meeting and I interviewed the teachers (An Ran, 2001). When we looked carefully at what the two groups were saying, we began to feel that they were travelling along two parallel tracks, never destined never to meet. The teachers saw learning as a developmental process and were happy where they could see

evidence that children were making progress towards a target. They tended to stress the positive, describing children's work as 'very good', 'good' or 'satisfactory'. In contrast, the priority for the parents was to identify their children's weaknesses so they could help them to practice and improve. The parents, then, felt that the British teachers' approach was unrealistic and unhelpful; the teachers thought that the parents' approach was harsh and likely to undermine the children's confidence. Neither side seemed to realize that the teachers' use of 'targets' and the parents' use of 'weaknesses' are essentially two sides of the same coin. Yet, when we shared parent and teacher concerns, all parties were surprised. Like the people of Ferndale, everyone seemed to assume that other people think the way that they do; and even where we suspect there are differences, it never occurs to us that our way of doing or being or thinking is not necessarily the best way.

Learning to read in and out of school: the case of the Pahari-speaking children

This raises an important question: how do the children who find themselves in the middle of conflicting worldviews make sense of their experiences? Let me tell you another story, this time about a UK school described by Leena Robertson (2006) where many of the pupils speak Pahari, one of the languages of Pakistan. Pupils learn to read in three main settings – the mainstream classroom, a lunchtime class teaching Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, and after-school Qu'ran classes in the mosque. The mainstream teachers offer an 'English-Only' version of literacy and make no reference to the children's learning outside the classroom. The teacher in the lunchtime Urdu club uses the children's bilingualism as a springboard for teaching how to read in Urdu. The Qu'ran classes are different again: reading is a group activity here, not an individual or a paired activity. The children, then, are learning to read in three languages in three pedagogical styles, allowing them to see literacies as systems. Rather than confusing children, these differences serve as a catalyst for thinking more deeply about reading and writing. For instance, the children learn procedural knowledge: *what* gets taught, *when*, and *how*. In the mainstream classroom, this can take the form of 'doing the title' before starting to read a book while in Qur'an classes it means reciting by heart. Children also have a well-developed idea of 'how you do it properly' in each of the settings: for instance, they are eager to explain that when they recite the Qur'an, there must not be any 'cheating'.

The role of siblings

And here's another story, this time with Bangladeshi families again. At Goldsmiths College London, Eve Gregory and her colleagues have looked at reading in yet another context: the home (Gregory, 1998; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Kelly, Gregory & Williams, 2001). Primary school teachers tend to attach a great deal of importance to taking books home to read with parents. However, home reading in the Bangladeshi community usually means that children share their books with their siblings, the family members who are fluent in English, and not their parents. Interestingly, these older brother and sisters use strategies from both the school and the mosque to scaffold the reading of younger children. Gregory (1998, pp.43–4) outlines several stages in this process, the first of which is 'Listen and repeat'[1]:

Sibling	*Child*
The postman	The postman
It was Tum's birthday	was … birthday
Ram made	Ram made
him a birthday card	him a birthday card

As the child becomes more confident you find examples of 'chained reading', where the older child starts and the younger child continues with the next few words until they need help again. At this point, big sister or brother either corrects or provides the word while little brother or sister repeats the correction and continues:

Sibling	*Child*
It's	It's a whobber. Meg…
Mog	Mog catched a fish
caught	caught a fish
…	They cook
cooked	cooked a fish
and	and Owl had a rest.
looked out	Meg was looking

(1) The presentation of these extracts – but not the precise wording – has been slightly modified for ease of understanding.

The very high number of turns and the fast flowing pace of children's reading in chained reading are very much features of practice in the Qur'an classes described by Robertson (2006). This stage develops first to the point where the younger child reads almost alone and then to 'recital' where they perform the complete piece. But home reading also has examples of strategies found in mainstream school, including prediction, echoing and the 'chunking' of expressions. Children, it would seem, are quite capable of negotiating their way through different systems, and selecting features that suit their needs.

Teaching English in China

The next story moves from students to teachers. Evaluations at the end of three-month courses on language teaching for teachers of English from China in a UK University are consistently positive. However, colleagues involved in the delivery are equally interested in exploring the impact of these courses when the teachers return to China (Edwards & Li, 2011; Li & Edwards, 2014; Li, Zhang & Edwards, in press).

The statistics on the growth of English in China are astonishing. For instance, an estimated 300 million people are learning or have learned English (Hu, 2002). By the new millennium, close to 80 million secondary school students were studying English and there were an estimated 470,000 teachers of English (Wang & Lam, 2009). Behind the statistics, however, are some chastening realities, including the fact that very many English teachers have limited competence in the language.

One of the threads going through all these stories is the assumption that there is only one way of doing things; English teaching in China is another case in point. Culture shapes our attitudes to most things and language teaching – and more specifically communicative language teaching (CLT) – is no exception (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). While CLT is not a simple, unitary concept, there is considerable consensus about key features such as:

- Learners need to use the target language for meaningful purposes;
- Errors are a normal part of language learning, and constant correction is unnecessary, and even counterproductive;
- Language analysis and grammar explanation may help some learners, but extensive experience of target language use helps everyone

- Effective language teaching is responsive to the needs and interests of the individual learner;
- Effective language learning is an active process, in which the learner takes increasing responsibility for his or her progress;
- The effective teacher aims to facilitate, not control, the language learning process.

There is an obvious mismatch between the principles underpinning CLT and traditional Chinese approaches where, typically, teachers select and transmit knowledge and initiate interactions and focus on the study of grammar, cross-linguistic comparison and translation, and memorisation of patterns and vocabulary. Teacher educators ignore this cultural dimension at their peril (Hinkel, 1999).

In the 1980s, despite the gulf between traditional expectations and western innovations, Chinese educators, dissatisfied with students' communicative abilities, initiated a top-down reform of English language teaching, which integrated elements of CLT. Teacher training was given high priority with programs both in China and overseas. According to Gu (2005), the aim of many of these programs, particularly in the early stages, was to introduce 'more effective CLT methodologies' and the British specialists on these training projects behaved very much as 'missionaries' of CLT.

To what extent, however, is CLT currently implemented in China? It would seem that traditional approaches still dominate, particularly in rural areas. But there is also evidence of Chinese teachers' openness and willingness to change. The studies of the impact of the UK courses on teachers' return to China confirm this to be the case. Teacher responses were by no means uniform. In some cases, the UK experience seemed to have had minimal impact (Li, Zhang & Edwards (in press). In the words of one of the returnees:

> To be honest, it's really hard to start anything meaningful. It's also extremely time consuming. In addition, we receive very poor treatment here. The school regulations are very strict and we're badly treated. So, the teachers have poor motivation. It affects teachers' motivation.

And many other teachers talked about the constraints around exams:

> Some advanced pedagogical ideas cannot yet be fully implemented with the current educational situation in China.

> … This is because of the constraints of … our national examination system, the actual needs of the parents and students and the utilitarian value attached to student progression and *Gaokao* [the university entrance examination]".

But there was also evidence of innovation and change with some teachers showing how the methods they had learned on the course could be used, even in examination classes:

> During revision, I can ask the students to form groups ... If students do not understand any aspect of the grammar, they can learn from the stronger students, who can offer help to them. After the students have a better understanding by learning from each other, the teacher can then follow up.

There was also evidence of the same synergy described in the story above about the Bangladeshi families in East London. As another of the teachers explained:

> Some of the things I learned … I felt I could not directly apply them in my classroom really. So I now adapted them a bit, [explaining to my colleagues] why I adapted them this way or that way, what were the levels of my students, what were the characteristics of the textbook, and what my actual teaching situation was like.

The power dimension

A number of themes run through these stories: What counts as literacy and learning? What are the expectations of the students? In the case of school children, what are the expectations of their parents? How do the expectations of parents and students differ from the expectations of their teachers? What are the gaps in teacher knowledge about students? To make sense of these stories, we need to take into consideration not only knowledge but also power relations. This next and final story comes from the courtroom, not from the classroom, and aims to make a point of relevance to educators.

All the stories to this point have been about speakers of English as a second language. It is commonly assumed that the issues are less complex when dealing with other dialects. This conclusion, however, overlooks the fact that culture and meaning are not only embedded in grammar and vocabulary but also shape discourse. The Pinkenba case, based on the work of Diana Eades is one such example. Her handbook on *Aboriginal English and the Law* (Eades, 1992) set out to sensitize the legal profession to the

importance of often quite subtle linguistic differences between standard English and Aboriginal English. Unfortunately, this knowledge was cynically manipulated to the detriment of three Aboriginal boys aged 12, 13 and 14 who had allegedly been taken in separate vehicles late at night and abandoned in an industrial wasteland 14 kilometres away. Six police officers were charged with unlawfully depriving these boys of their liberty in a committal hearing where the boys appeared as witnesses for the prosecution. The case centred on whether or not they had gone against their will.

At the hearing, the handbook for lawyers was clearly visible on the defence counsel's Bar table. In a pattern of behaviour known as gratuitous concurrence, when speakers of Aboriginal English say "yes" to a question, it can mean: "I think that if I say 'yes' you will see that I am obliging, and you will think well of me, and things will work out well between us". Gratuitous concurrence can also signal feelings of hopelessness, as in the following example (Eades, 2002: 169–70):

Defence Counsel (DC): David let me try to summarise if I can – what you – what you've told us, you told us yesterday that the *real* problem wasn't anything that happened getting into the car or *in* the car – but the fact that you were left at Pinkenba – that right?
David: Mm
DC: Mm – That's the truth isn't it?
David: Mm
DC: You see you weren't *deprived* of your liberty at all – in going out there – it was the fact you were *left* there that you thought was wrong?
David: Yeh
DC: Eh?
David: Yeh
DC: You got *in* the car without being forced – you went *out* there without being forced – the problem began when you were left there?
David: Mm
Prosecutor: With respect your Worship – there are three elements to that question and I ask my friend to break them down.
Magistrate: Yes – just break it up one by one Mr Humphrey.
DC: You got in the car without being forced David didn't you?
David: No
DC: You told us – you've told us a (laughs) number of times today you did.
David: They forced me.

The time between initial and follow up questions was so short that the witness could not think about the question. The defense lawyer used repeated direct questions with multiple propositions to make David seem to agree that he was unreliable. Thus the same strategies described as inappropriate in the questioning of Aboriginal witnesses in the handbook were used to very negative effect in questioning the boys.

To understand what was happening we need to look at the wider picture. The witnesses were powerless: they were children in an adult court; they were participants in a legal system that systematically oppresses Aboriginal people; and they had no experience of the language of the courtroom. In this particular case, Aboriginal Legal Services and the Criminal Justice Commission were challenging the police. The defence counsel were among the top criminal lawyers in Queensland and had far greater experience than the prosecuting lawyer. In this David and Goliath struggle, unfortunately, it was David who was vanquished.

Lessons from stories

Telling stories has been described as the best way to teach, persuade, and even understand ourselves. So what lessons can we draw from these stories? The point of stories is that people are allowed to draw their own conclusions, but, with your indulgence, I would like to share some of the lessons that I have learned from my own research and from the research of others.

First, diversity is nothing new. On reflection, my own experience of being born and brought up in Ferndale leaves me with no doubt that we are *not* all the same. There has never been a golden age where we were all the same, even today and in spite of the fact that globalization has led to the movement of people and commerce on an unprecedented scale. It also needs to be acknowledged that people have always travelled and traded as demonstrated by the recent analysis of my DNA, which traced my maternal lineage, like that of many other present day Europeans, to the area around Iran and Kazakhstan.

Second, even if we are not all the same, we share a common humanity that requires us to find out more about each other, to stop making assumptions that our way of doing things is the best and only way; and to open ourselves to other ways of doing and being. There is simply no room for an exclusively white middle class, Eurocentric approach to what counts as teaching and learning.

Third, knowledge is paramount. When left to their own devices, the students who succeed take the best of both worlds: they use the syncretic approaches that correspond most closely to their own realities. The teachers who do best are open to other ways of doing and being and build on this, rather than pretending that there is only one way of doing and being.

Fourth, knowledge is not enough in itself. Teaching and learning takes place in the context of relations where some players are more powerful than others, where children are at the bottom of the pile and even teachers feel ground down by ever changing government policies and edicts. However, this does not mean that teachers are powerless. Culture – all cultures – are dynamic. The Chinese teacher who decided it was possible to use the strategies learned overseas in exam classes, in spite of the overwhelming constraints, had agency. And so do all teachers.

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