

Re-conceptualizing English Language Education through Autobiography:  
Toward a Pedagogy of Humiliations and Humanness

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Abstract

This paper considers how English language educators might use autobiography as a pedagogical form to engage their multiple experiences and relations to English and Englishness, and to consider implications for their work. Reflecting on autobiography from this perspective offers possibilities for grappling with our multiple connections and dis-connections to English and Englishness, becoming conscious of the discourses which shape us as educators, and engaging difference in productive and meaningful ways. In undertaking autobiography, we face aspects of ourselves, often aspects that come into conflict. This process of dis-equilibrium has the potential to engender a shift in understanding that helps us to re-conceptualize normative constructions and representations of English language pedagogy. This is a necessary undertaking for educators attempting to work with/in the possibilities of engaging reflectively and critically in English language education. It also offers a space to consider how we might use English ‘appropriately’ in our teachings and engagements.

“Any meaning derived from a source outside our acts murders us”  
(Cooper as cited in Pinar, 2000b, p. 374).

Foreword

In the world of languages, “Standard English is like the air [I] breathe, comparatively so colourless that it passes almost unnoticed” (McCrum as cited in Holborow, 1999, p. 150). The tension of this absent-presence compels and urges me, as an English language educator, to situate and interrogate my location with/in the English language and culture that I might embark on a journey from this location to another, toward ‘engendering a hybrid consciousness’ (Asher, 2002). On this journey I embrace autobiography as a pedagogical form, engaging my multiple experiences and relations to English and Englishness, and considering implications for my work. Grumet (1988) suggested if we, as practitioners of education, do not call forth individual

experiences and value them, we risk turning away from the “places where we were most thrilled, most afraid, most ashamed, and most proud... our experience gathers up its convictions and its questions and quietly leaves the room” (xvii). Perhaps, through writing and reflecting on autobiography with these emphases, I will grapple with my (dis)connections to English and Englishness in different (disruptive, alienated, generative) ways, becoming conscious both of the discourses that shape me and of newly synthesised, hybrid knowledges which engage difference in productive and meaningful ways. Tarrying with the complexities of drawing on the very language I attempt to trouble and transform, Asher (2002) reminds me “the other option, of course, is remaining silent, in-scribed” (p. 87), a re-assertion of my privileges. Like Watt (2007), I subjectively situate myself in the (un)comfortable position of critiquing dominant meanings in the language and culture within which I am inscribed yet which I resist belonging, with the possibility, as Aoki (1996a) reassures me, that by dwelling in such tensioned spaces “newness emerges... newness can flow” (pp. 318-319).

This paper traces the ways language educators might re-write their relationships to the languages they teach and foster alternative literacies, knowledges, and subjectivities in English language education via a curriculum of autobiographical writing. Moving in-between autobiographical narratives and a review of literature, I attempt to extend the conversation on the generative uses of engaging autobiographical practices and the ways they might be used critically and reflectively by language educators in their pedagogical work.<sup>1</sup> In order to do so, in the first section I outline the processes and tensions of engaging autobiography as method. In the second section I consider how such processes and tensions can lead to ruptures and reformulations in autobiographical subjects’ sense of themselves and their relationships to English and Englishness. In the third section I suggest such ruptures and reformulations make transformations possible. In the last section I consider the implications of these processes for re-conceptualizing normative constructions of English language pedagogy, that we might work with/in possibilities of engaging ‘appropriately’ in English language education.

#### Narrating/narrated: The Doubling Dances of Autobiographical Writing

Autobiography is both a method and a text: a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997), as well as a de-constructive tool which “allow[s] me independently to rediscover” (Trinh, 1992, p. 147). Autobiographical writing helps me to re-conceptualize normative constructions and representations of narratives, and provides me with an alternative narrative vehicle through the translation of theory: “Theory, at least in part, becomes the rendering of experience into words, the translation of the private *lebenswelt* into public language. It is, so to speak, the translation of practice into theory” (Pinar, 2000c, p. 391). How might I (re)read my own narratives as theoretical texts?

Leggo (1995) elaborated on this doubling space of being, at once, author and reader. Caught in-between tensioning relationships of storing life/storying life, truth/fiction, and collection/selection, he suggested “I am writing my impression, and perhaps my impressions are writing me” (p. 6). I find myself tarrying with/in this ambiguity as I engage my narratives: in tensioning with the method, I am producing (a produced) text. Feeling “the constant pull to fabrication and invention and exaggeration” (p. 6), to make words make me, I push and pull through the collection of experiences stored within my psychic realities and play with/in those

which I select and re-present in constructing my truthful-fictitious narratives, for as Leggo coyly

*Spelling in and out the Word 'Colonizer':*  
*c-o-l-o-n-i-z-e-r*

Engaging autobiography as method, I re-read my earliest memory of being in conflict with the English language and find myself (re)constructing a text of myself.

Age 11. Spelling b-e-e.

"Jennifer, please spell the word 'asset.'"

Jennifer replies: "asset, a-s-s-e-t-t, assett."

"I am sorry Jennifer, that is incorrect."

Jennifer hears the word IN-CORRECT.

Jennifer sees her parents in the audience frown. Jennifer sees the principal of her school frown. Jennifer's eyes sting with tears because her response was IN-CORRECT.

Good spelling represents conformity to convention and so serves to maintain institutional stability (Widdowson, 1998, p. 240). The IN-CORRECT spelling of the word on Jennifer's part was deviant and she feels the weight of her error stinging in her eyes, twisting in her stomach, constricting in her chest: "deviations from orthographic conventions undermine in some degree the institutions which they serve. They can be seen as evidence of social instability: a sign of things beginning to fall apart" (p. 240).

Jennifer responds by striving to become a champion of standard English, a master of spelling, an upholder of social stability. She wants to be a colonizer when she grows up.

noted, "I can manipulate, organize, and construct the world in my own image" (p. 6). I am constructed in this space, interpellated into subjectivity by my relationship to language and the writing of my experiences... the said and the unsaid, the written and the unwritten. "Writing is not self-expression: writing is self-construction" (p. 6), and through language, through rendering experiences into words, I form texts (of myself). Neel (1988) suggested "the last thing apt to happen in writing is 'self-discover.' Instead, what happens in writing is a forever becoming-present" (p. 124).

Narrative impulses are not after truth, but after explorations of possibilities of meanings. I focus on the process rather than the product, for in grappling with the text, the words, the methods, I am an in-process human be(com)ing. I become caught in what Aoki (1996b) called "a metonymic site of 'narrative and narration'" (p. 410), both narrating and be(com)ing narrated. Pinar (2000b) suggested "an intensive adherence to one's 'within' forms the basis of renewal strategies" (p. 382): renewal in narrative writing, the word, the world, the politics of language and subjectivity, and relations between self/other. But how are these renewal strategies manifest, and under what conditions? Considering how the processes and tensions of engaging autobiography as method can

lead to ruptures and reformulations in autobiographical subjects' sense of themselves and their relationships to English and Englishness is where this paper turns next.

### Desiring Dis-order

Struggling with/in the method, struggling with/in myself, I play along the possibilities that autobiography might challenge normative experiences and the canonicity of Englishness, and form the basis of renewal strategies through encounters with an otherness of 'ishness' and in-between the margins of Engli/ishness. Through writing autobiographically I attempt to decentre the English canon by way of dis-placing the English subject: the process of disrupting and reworking the boundaries of self-and-other unfolds as one encounters understandings of the otherness with/in. Here, I evoke concepts of mobility (Durham Peters, 1999), for otherness wanders through the centres of the master signifiers of English and Englishness, splitting, fragmenting, dis-placing (Aoki, 1996b). I must be reflexive and intentional about this process if I am to re-constitute meaning. I must desire dis-order in that:

Disorder, in other words, is continually breaking in; meaninglessness is recurrently overcoming landscapes which once were demarcated, meaningful. It is at moments like these that the individual reaches out to reconstitute meaning, to close the gaps, to make sense once again. (Greene, 2000, p. 307)

Considering my experiences through autobiographical writing is being in a space of dis-order and fracturing. I am a nomad moving about a landscape of (em)bodied experiences, collecting and leaving behind traces of myself to re-create a sense of the wor(l)d, a sense of home. I am a nomad, in Durham Peters' (1999) sense of the word, of English, transported and transferred and translated across its different spaces, temporarily inhabiting and moving across and between and through its shifting signifiers, caught in what Talib (2000) calls the 'linguistic confusion of English.' I am both in exile and at home with/in the canon, guest and host with/in myself, attempting to embrace the dis-order of these shifting spaces and shifting signifiers.

Engaging autobiography is an inter-text of tension, dis-order, dis-ruption characterizing three inter-related moments: rupturing oneself; meeting one's otherness; (re)constructing meaning. Travelling in/to the (un)familiar places of my mind and my memories, I engage in Greene's (2000) description of learning as:

...a mode of orientation – or reorientation [or disorientation] – in a place suddenly become unfamiliar. And 'place' is a metaphor, in this context, for a domain of consciousness, intending, forever thrusting outward, 'open to the world.' (p. 308)

Necessary to this journey is an exile from the comforts of home, for "if [I] am to learn, [I] must identify what is questionable, try to break through what is obscure. Action is required of [me], not mere gazing; praxis, not mere reverie" (p. 309). Greene suggested that, if one is to undertake action, it must be against the backdrop of one's original perceptions, with a clear sense of being present to oneself:

Only with the ability to be reflective about what he is doing will he be brave enough to incorporate his past into the present, to link the present to a future. All this will demand a conscious appropriation of new perspectives of his experience and a continual reordering of that experience as new horizons... become visible, as new problems arise. (p. 309)

Action thus implies a reflexive/reflective process of cracking open spaces for meanings to flow out. Engaging Zizek (1995), Aoki (1996b) described the dilemma of the centreless flag, that is, a flag with the master signifier cut out. He noted the brevity of the moment of the centreless master signifier, followed by the instant in which people clamour to fill the void with new hegemonic signifiers:

...when we experience loss, often our desire is to fill the space of loss such that the 'empty' space, the space of the negative, becomes invisible. We tend to replace the lost master signifier with another master signifier, itself claiming its own hegemonic power. (p. 410)

Experience is ongoing, “divided and deferred – always behind us as something to be recovered, yet still before us as something to be produced” (Culler as cited in Aoki, 1996c, p. 419).

Attempting to work out (temporary) synthesis of one’s experiences, continually reordering past-present-future experiences, is, as Asher (2002) suggested:

...[a] recursive reworking – the process of becoming aware of and working with the internal and external contradictions and splits in an ongoing basis – [which] leads us into new spaces and ways of thinking, beyond polarities and binaries... a productive process which allows us to deconstruct othering at the individual and systemic levels. (p. 83)

Such recursive reworkings of the subject must, paradoxically, be actively constituted through the absent-presence of the subject in (un)familiar places.

Trinh (2005) echoed these ideas with regards to language: “one has to exile oneself from one’s own language, to assume the role of guest within one’s own territory, if one is to create anew and become multilingual within one’s own language” (p. 123). This is the task of autobiography: in exile from my (not-my) language, always “conjur[ing] something new in the very act of looking backward” (Durham Peters, 1999, p. 20). With each look back, each (re)turn home, my sense of home and (be)longing with/in the spaces of English and Englishness shift: “home is always mobile. Hence there is a subtle doubleness here: being at home everywhere, but lacking any fixed ground” (p. 21). My privilege grants me the safety of (re)turning home to Englishness, but

*English, a Shifting Landscape of Home and Exile*

When I last returned from Vietnam, my telephone calls to my friends living there were frequent. Words were my attempt to return to their presence in my life. Words also defeated me, as I struggled through bits of broken Vietnamese and fragmented English. Words were chosen and strung together carefully in anticipation of my friends understanding my intentions, my meanings, my feelings. Wanting a hybrid language where we could meet and play and feel together.

There were times I would call and moments would lapse when the tension of broken languages, broken selves was so thick I would return ‘home’ to standard English, both seeking its familiar comforts and exiled in speaking a language that was not mine, for in speaking it I could not be understood. I spoke it in despair and in frustration, hoping and desiring for communication and connection. How much less connected my friends must have felt, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying out “Jennifer, I no understand!” I re-call Widdowson (1998) telling me “of course, those who are unable to master the system are excluded from the community” (p. 241). While hoping for comfort, I sowed dis-comfort; while desiring to play in what was common between us, the un-common came and ruined the game.

Other times, I would call, hold the phone to my ear, and say nothing, no words spoken, a voluntary exile, relinquishing English to the language of the landscape: the motorbikes driving by open doors, horns growing and fading as the drivers communicated to one another through the traffic, voices in Vietnamese shouting in the streets, my friends in the background shouting questions to whoever was holding the receiver for me to answer. Overwhelmed with translations of the landscape and unable to communicate in spoken words, I was ill-literate.

All of these languages engendered the same tensions: all languages (un)spoken and rented, none owned. The spaces between our telephone calls have grown, as the tensions are (em)bodied with/in us. Sometimes I pick up the phone and dial their numbers, wait(ing)...for their apologies of not being able to speak better English... wait(ing)... for my apologies of speaking English... wait(ing)... for the moments when our shared dis-connections and exiles open inter-connectedness and spaces of home...

this home is continuously re-worked and I am inhabiting the dwelling differently each time I go back to it, each time feeling more (un)comfortable. The subject can never fully arrive to a home that is 'always mobile.' Rather, the subject synthesises oneself, arriving at an integrated perception that is already departing for it is temporally and spatially constituted. Always playing on and in-between the cusps of Engli/ishness, sometimes in the privileges of English, sometimes in the otherness of Ishness, constantly shuttling back and forth and in-between "a number of spaces locating me somewhere between an insider and an outsider" (Trinh, 1999, p. 30), I am perpetually conceived from the interstices of (dis)placement and (be)longing, exile and home. Let us consider in more depth the ways autobiographical subjects negotiate such in-between spaces, thus making transformations possible.

### The Perpetual Death and Birth of the Subject(s): Possibilities of Autobiographical Writing

What is the use of engaging autobiographical writing? What transformative possibilities might take flight? In engaging autobiography I face multiple aspects of myself, often aspects that come into conflict through the processes of regressing and progressing and becoming a voyeur of one's otherness. These processes have potential to effect/affect a shift in consciousness and understanding. But what of this shift, what translating and transformative spaces does it engender? How to (re)constitute one's experiences? What understandings and meanings might emerge from the dis-placed subject that has been cut and left fragmented by its otherness? This strategy might be likened to what Bhabha (2006) called the "*dialectical* hinge between the birth and death of the subject" (p. 92). If the effects/affects of engaging autobiography are dialectical and constitute a "change of consciousness" (Pinar, 2000a, p. 413) then, as Bhabha tells us, it is precisely this 'dialectical hinge' that "needs to be interrogated" (p. 92). Engaging autobiography is similar to what Bhabha calls the "concept and moment of *enunciation*" (p. 51), "the disintegrative moment... that sudden disjunction of the present" (p. 310). In recursively travelling through and in-between one's experiences, the subject is fractured and fragmented and dis-placed. The awareness that emerges from the process may be construed as what Asher (2002) calls "a consciousness of one's own particular 'borderlands'" (p. 83): the 'borderlands' of my situatedness, implicatedness, and otherness with/in English and Englishness. I find myself at the 'interstices' as Bhabha would say, a centreless flag in-between the spaces of Engli/ishness.

The temporality and spatiality of these borderline engagements excites, for this state of marginality becomes "an unprecedented source of creative energy" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002, p. 12). Bhabha (2006) echoed this creative potential when he suggested "[i]t is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that... intersubjective and collective experiences... are negotiated" (p. 2). Anzaldúa (1987) elaborated on these generative possibilities by stating:

In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness... though a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (p. 80)

I develop hybrid understandings of myself, in which "[h]ybridity has no... perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures... in a

dialectical play of ‘recognition’” (Bhabha, 2006, p. 162). Rather, it is “always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid” (p. 162). These knowings of self are “‘moment[s] of praxis,’ opening into ‘what has not yet been’” (Greene, 2000, p. 299). Reminded that “[t]his may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin” (Bhabha, 2006, p. 93), I begin in the middle, at the interstices, wherever I am, operating from hybrid spaces. With the possibility of experiencing a “certain evolution of one’s powers of understanding” (Pinar, 2000c, p. 394) and shed light on the generative possibilities that come from inter-connected experiences and (un)commonness – that is, “*belonging* together” (Aoki, 1991, pp. 396-398) – I interrupt comfortable reflexivity and prefer the (un)comfortable, conflicted, tenuous understandings of self and other. Engaging these dialectical dialogues and embracing these tension-filled spaces as ways of encountering the other and, hence, self, I dwell in the tension. With these generative possibilities in mind, let us turn towards considering implications of these processes for English language education.

### Autobiography as Curriculum: Using English Appropriately?

Dwelling in tension-filled spaces, I wonder is it possible to engage appropriately in English language education? Facing my implicatedness in the English language, I struggle to effect/affect a hybrid voice within my educational endeavours. English language may structure my body, but it does not script me in definite fashions. English language is capable of accounting for post-colonial experience, but “it needs to develop an ‘appropriate’ usage in order to do so (by becoming a distinct and unique form of english)” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002, p. 11). Appropriate, appropriated, appropriation. How, then, do we as educators use English appropriately in English language education? McCarthy (1998) argued that any single narrative or identity at the core of the curriculum is in fact a dangerous confinement. Perhaps using the English language appropriately means hybridising English language pedagogy, curriculum, and canon by way of hybridising ourselves, both as educators and as learners.

#### *On the Tensions of Being an Author-ity: Who ‘Owns’ English?*

I re-member teaching in an ESL summer program for 12 to 14 year olds recently immigrated to Canada. Our learning environment was complex: one English class, one ‘native’ speaker, 15 countries, 19 students, 19 english-es, 20 sets of live(d) experiences. The other English teachers often scolded and ridiculed me for replacing the rules of grammar with ‘curriculum-as-live(d)-experience,’ as Aoki (1996c) calls it. That these teachers believed in a curriculum of standard English, although most of them were speakers of English as a second or third or fourth language, surprised me... was it a psychic effect/affect of their own exposures to a foreign body of language and writing (Gunew, 2004, p. 58)? “How will they be prepared for school in September?” they asked me, a question which, ironically, represented my motivations and intentions for attempting to engender an appropriate space for the teaching of english-es. I felt without a language to respond to their critiques. Now, I recall Widdowson’s (1998) cautionary note: “You should not assume, with bland arrogance, that your way of teaching English, or your way of using English, carries a general guarantee of quality. To put the point briefly: English and English teaching are proper to the extent that they are appropriate, not to the extent that they are appropriated” (p. 248).

Having journeyed through the transformative processes of autobiographical writing, educators might gain better understandings of the potential of autobiography as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. Language learners experience displacement in classrooms: they must negotiate different languages, different worlds, and different understandings of themselves. In his study of the English-only school system in

British Columbia, Gunderson (2000) described the language learners as:

...lost in the spaces between various identities: the teenager, the immigrant, the first-language speaker, the individual from the first culture, the individual socializing into a second language and culture, the individual with neither a dominant first or second culture, but one not of either culture. (p. 702)

Such language learners are nomads moving across and in-between linguistic and cultural landscapes, caught in-between owning and not-owning the English language, between belonging and not-belonging, between English and *Ishness*. How might they use autobiography as a way of negotiating this in-between-ness, to tarry with/in the borderlands of *Engli/ishness*? How might they find hospitality through engagements of autobiography?

Engaging autobiographical processes is not easy. hooks (1997) tells us “it is never an easy decision or task to write about one’s emotional landscape” (xxi). The experience of re-calling experiences can be painful and terrifying. Equally difficult for language learners is the decision of which language to use in their processes of (w)riting. In her analyses of autobiographies in which authors wrote ‘life 1 in language 2,’ Steinman (2005) observed that “a number of learners noted the tension, complexity, and dissonance of writing in one language about events that had happened in another” (p. 71). Could this tension be a source of generative possibilities?

Processing and negotiating the foreign-ness of a language and curriculum that is not one’s own, in other words, “defamiliarization – exile from one’s language... [is], in many cases, an impetus to creativity” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 52). Tension and creativity join together in a doubling dance: creating, dis-placing, (re)creating... recursive processes in negotiations of one’s selves. In engaging their narratives as live(d) curriculum and in (w)riting themselves into curricula, English language learners produce and also dis-place themselves by way of mediation, for as hooks (1998) suggested “When we rewrite the past, looking back with our current understanding, a mediation is always taking place” (xxii). In engaging autobiography, language learners re-position themselves and their experiences in relation to languages, cultures, places, spaces, and times which are ‘other.’ The third space inhabited by the author in being caught in-between English and *Englishness* then functions “as the place for the construction of identities that are neither one nor the other” (Kanu, 2003, p. 77). Engaging autobiography becomes a productive de-stabilizing activity, or what Hoffman (1999) called “a source of destabilization of taken-for-granted categories, representations and truths” (p. 464). Destabilization is necessary as a pedagogical endeavour in English language education “for it is only when we do so that we can generate alternatives to what already exists” (p. 481). Autobiography in the classroom offers possibilities for articulating the said and the unsaid, negotiating binaries, de-constructing one’s experiences and (re)constructing meaning. Language learners claim author/ship of their wor(l)ds and their selves through the use of their own languages (English, not-English, *english*) and the (re)telling of stories in their own words.

#### Dwelling (t)here: A Pedagogy from In-Between

This article has considered how language educators might re-write their relationships to the languages they teach. Moving in-between autobiographical narratives and a review of literature, I

have attempted to extend the conversation on the generative uses of engaging autobiographical practices and the ways autobiographical writing might be used critically and reflectively by language educators in their pedagogical work. The sections traced the processes and tensions of engaging autobiography as method, and how they can lead to ruptures and reformulations in autobiographical subjects' sense of themselves and their relationships to English and Englishness, thus making transformations possible.

I have also attempted to open a discussion to consider the potentials of autobiography for language learners. When educators participate in autobiographical processes, they invoke opportunities to de-centre the hegemony of the English language and to critically reflect on what it means to be an educator within a curriculum of English and Englishness. For learners who participate in autobiographical processes, the purposes and implications are somewhat different. Autobiography is potentially a space for validation of the feelings of dis-place-ment experienced by language learners in classrooms.

However, educators who wish to use autobiography as an effective pedagogical tool in the classroom might begin by turning the gaze on themselves (Spack, 1997). Bringing to light our relationships to the languages we teach, when ordinarily they remain "so colourless that [they pass] almost unnoticed" (McCrum cited in Holborow, 1999, p. 150), is often painful, shameful, and humiliating. However, Aoki (1993) helped us to re-conceptualize this experience of humiliation so that it is not a word that merely sounds negative, but a sign of our humanness, by sharing:

Here, *humiliating* shifts its meaning, admittedly ambiguously, to one that is concerned with lived space where people dwell communally, where dwelling is a dwelling with others on earth under the sky, where we find *humus* that nurtures *humans*, where *humans* caught up in binds sometimes chuckle, where we can hear laughter at the thought of humans thinking they can master the world. (p. 300)

If we wish to engage English language education 'appropriately' and develop 'appropriate' usages of the English language (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002), perhaps it would serve us well as educators to engage our humiliations. The humiliation of re/membering not only opens up spaces to re-consider our experiences, our assumptions, and our normative relationships to English and Englishness, but it also opens up possibilities for creating a shared humanness between ourselves and the learners with whom we engage.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes, 1977, p.146). The autobiographical narratives and the review of literature are presented parallel to one another, to signify a performative conversation. The reader is called to actively interact with them to produce meaning.