THEY HAVE LESSONS TO TEACH ME

Critical reflection and autoethnography in an Australian adult migrant English program

Skye Playsted

Introduction

This is a chapter about a critically reflective journey that began during a two-year period when I was teaching in an Australian adult migrant English program (AMEP). Critical reflection in education includes an individual teacher’s reflexive approach towards their teaching practices; the “critical” also refers to questions about broader socio-political concerns, their pedagogical implications and how individual teachers view and respond to these concerns (Anderson, 2020). In this chapter I use an autoethnographic approach to describe my experiences, questions and reflections about critical issues that were new to me as a teacher entering the field of English language teaching (ELT). Although I had not considered these questions prior to working in ELT, I could not escape them as I was confronted with assumptions I had made about the people I was working with: adult students learning English who lacked access to the linguistic capital and privileges that speaking in this language afforded (Liscio & Farrelly, 2019). As I began to teach in a context that was new to me, I became suddenly aware of my own privilege as a white, monolingual, native-English-speaking teacher born in Australia. This privilege had been there all along, but had been invisible to me before this point, and so I began to read and reflect on critical issues and consider how these could change the way I teach and research (Holman Jones, 2005).

The chapter begins with a brief overview of autoethnography, in which I discuss Stanley’s (2019) recent call for autoethnographic research in ELT to develop a stronger social justice focus and its need to “cross-pollinate[e]” (p. 15) with autoethnography conducted in other disciplines. I then integrate autoethnography and critical reflection (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010) to describe incidents I encountered during my work as a volunteer English teacher in community centre and later in an Australian AMEP (Playsted, 2019). Narratives are used to describe these critical incidents, highlighting an awareness of English as a language of power and my position in relation to this power (Pennycook, 2001). I discuss how discrimination expressed towards friends in my community prompted me to consider the “non-neutral” (Stanley, 2019, p. 16) nature of ELT as a field of teaching, and then discuss shifts in my perspective and
classroom teaching approach as I responded to this “non-neutrality” in my own practice. In the chapter, I reflect on the role of autoethnography as a research method to engage others in critical reflection and consider some possible applications for research to encourage teacher engagement with critically reflective dialogue.

**Autoethnography, ELT and a need for “cross-pollination”**

Autoethnography as a research method draws on personal experience to analyse cultural understandings, using elements of story writing such as narrative, character development and dialogue to describe and make sense of these experiences (Jones et al., 2016). In ELT, autoethnography has been used to explore the nature of teachers’ professional identity development (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; Pearson Casanave, 2012). In language teacher education, Yazan (2019) has suggested that pre-service teachers should be encouraged to engage in critical autoethnography in order to help them access and express their understanding of identity formation as ELT practitioners. Because it draws on personal experiences to express insights into broader cultural phenomena, autoethnography has at times been discredited as a method that lacks the objectivity of other qualitative research methods (Delamont, 2009). However, it has become increasingly accepted in qualitative research as a method that offers researchers diverse ways to view, explore and express their experiences of culture (Adams et al., 2014).

Autoethnography in ELT is still a “less-treaded path” (Mirhosseini, 2018, p. 76), despite autoethnographic writing offering an ideal space to foreground stories that capture the diversity of experiences and critical issues in the field. Even though criticality is considered a key feature of autoethnography as a method (Adams et al., 2014), this is not always prominent in ELT literature. Considering this, some researchers have suggested that ELT autoethnography should “cross-pollinate” (Stanley, 2019, p. 15) with other areas of autoethnography, and perhaps draw on the critical perspectives used in other fields to bring them more clearly into view in ELT autoethnography. In the context of ELT, a critical view counters the traditional view that teaching English is a neutral and helpful endeavour, empowering English language learners with more equitable access to English-language-dominated environments. It takes into account the socially- and politically-situated nature of ELT, and raises issues of social justice such as inequity of access to employment based on linguistic background (Pennycook, 2017). For example, English is spoken and taught as an additional language by more non-native speakers and teachers of English than by native speakers (Hamid, 2016), yet in many countries the ELT profession is still “the proud privilege of expatriates” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 68) who have native English-speaking status. In ELT literature, “Western/grand narratives” (Canagarajah, 2016, p. 10) have traditionally dominated research and limited the ability of research voices from marginalised regions to bring a much-needed global perspective to research in this area (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Rose et al., 2020).

In a recent review, Stanley (2019) asserted that if we as ELT autoethnographers did not acknowledge or position ourselves in relation to critical issues, we risked perpetuating a narrow, Western view of research that would not adequately address these issues in ELT. At the time I read Stanley’s (2019) paper, I was studying a master’s degree to teach English as an additional language, but I was not familiar with much of the critical, autoethnographic literature in this field (see, for example, Pathak, 2010; and Yazan, Canagarajah and Jain, 2021). Reading Stanley’s (2019) article brought a sense of discomfort because it pushed me, a teacher and researcher from a privileged, white background, to ask myself questions about my lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997) and my views of these experiences. Autoethnography had become a methodology I valued and wanted to employ in my writing, as I appreciated
They have lessons to teach me

its evocative narratives that situated a researcher as a person within their scholarly writing. However, I wondered how I could write about my experiences in a way that could meet the autoethnographic obligations of “story-making” (Bochner, 2017, p. 74), but also “give voice to people and ideas that might otherwise be voiceless” (Stanley, 2019, p. 16). I began to ask myself how I might allow others’ voices and experiences to change the way I viewed my own, as I sought to “re-read [my own] experience” (Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 135) through a more critical lens.

**Teaching in a community centre: welcomed as a “new” teacher**

I trained as a teacher and after teaching for 20 years in schools in my local area, I decided to return to postgraduate study and to focus on adults in the ELT sector. Teaching adults was new for me, and so I contacted a friend who taught English to adults and asked if I could gain some ELT experience there. The small, community centre where I volunteered conducted weekly English language classes for adults from refugee backgrounds. Volunteers came each week to help work at the centre and were mostly retired from full-time work. Many, as I did, possessed a background in school teaching. For the students who came each week, the classes provided important social support as well as English language learning support. Some had already completed their 500 hours of funded English tuition as AMEP students, and so they came to the community classes to maintain English language skills. They were often the primary carers for their children. As the students had limited access to transport and employment in the town, the community centre picked them up with a volunteer-driven bus each week. Other volunteers offered childminding as the parents took part in their English language lessons, and students and teachers shared a brief morning tea to break the two-hour-long English lesson. It was here that I was first confronted by what I now understand is a critical incident (Brookfield, 2017).

When I began teaching English to refugees, I was moved by the care they showed me. “Welcome!” they said as they held my hands in their own. The kindness shown to me by those who had experienced so much suffering brought me to a place that was humbler than any I’d known in my teaching career. I know I am becoming a better teacher because of it; I am becoming a teacher who is willing to learn and listen.

I have to listen hard, because sometimes their stories come out in broken sentences, mixed with periods of silence and grief. Sometimes I don’t know what a facial expression means, or what is written in between the unspoken lines of the conversation I am part of. Between the three of us (the speaker, the online translation app, and me) we break down the walls as best we can. It’s exhausting and confronting. The worst of the stories come out when I least expect them. Most of the time, I feel inadequate and ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of this sort of teaching. I wish I had learned more languages. I wish I were more perceptive and aware of what is culturally expected in other places, so that I wouldn’t unwittingly trample over what is important to someone else. “Walking out of who we are and walking towards who others are” is how Kenneth Fasching-Varner (2017) so perfectly expressed it. Despite my own feelings of inadequacy, I know I have something to give as well as something to learn.

As a teacher, I feel I have reached a high point in my teaching career: I teach those who have nothing left to lose. And yet, out of their loss, they have lessons to teach me, the “teacher”. Respect, pride, compassion, gratitude, determination, courage and hope are some of the lessons I can learn from the people I teach.
Up until this point, I thought I knew a lot about teachers, students and about teaching in general. I also knew a lot about teaching English. After all, I was a native speaker of English, I had lived and taught in “my” local area for a long time, and I was doing a master’s degree in English language teaching. Yet, when I began to teach at the community centre, I wondered who these welcoming, refugee-background people were, and why it seemed that I had not seen them around town before? Why did they welcome me? I thought this was my home, and I should be the one welcoming them. With one word from a group of refugee-background women I had never met before, “Welcome!”, my assumed sense of belonging and my understanding of where I fit in the classroom as an expert, English-speaking teacher had been turned on its head. Critical seeds of doubt had been sown, and had begun to “explode [my] settled worldviews” (Brookfield, 2017, p. 71). At the same time as I was experiencing the discomfort of doubt, I was also feeling strangely at home in this new, more vulnerable position. Acknowledging and giving power to another is enacted through more than words. I did not share the same first language as my students, but I learned that much of the communication in the beginner English language classroom is unspoken. We shared few words in spoken English, but “touch and smiles and nods [could] bind us together” (Phipps, 2019, p. 34). This was more than accepting a gesture of kindness and hospitality from a student, I realised: there were forms of communication that were more important than a sentence spoken in English. I looked forward to the volunteer classes each week, and when I began teaching in a paid role at the local AMEP, I tried to continue with some volunteer teaching when I could.

**Becoming a friend and a teacher: ELT is a “non-neutral” practice**

My introduction to AMEP was thanks to Jaya, who had lived with her family in Australia for nine years on a temporary visa. Jaya was an asylum seeker. When she was sixteen, the war in her homeland was at its peak. Jaya had completed high school and was hoping to begin studying at university the following year, but her parents feared for their daughter’s safety as the youngest girl in the family. Jaya was sent on a boat to another country, where she lived in a refugee camp for some years. She married there and left the camp with her husband and their two-year-old daughter to seek asylum in Australia. I met Jaya through a mutual friend who had given her my number to contact about English lessons. I helped her to enrol in the local AMEP and was subsequently offered teaching work there. Jaya was in my first AMEP class, and we have remained friends ever since.

When my friend Jaya asks for help, I gain much more than I give. I share a story and jokes with her son who is the same age as my son. She offers me homemade chai and several courses of food that she prepares while I am there. I offer to help, but she asks me to sit down at the table instead. I feel guilty enjoying the flavours on my own. She waits in the kitchen, and I eat and drink as her guest before she will join me at the table.

She hasn’t heard from immigration about the application to renew her temporary protection visa yet. I helped her with the application 18 months ago, but she is still waiting to hear. It’s always on her mind. They have lived here for nine years, and her husband works night shift six nights a week, even though it’s getting physically difficult for him to continue with the labour. He won’t risk leaving to look for another job. He needs the permanent work; it looks better on the visa application. The visa application is always on her mind. It’s on my mind too, but I try not to ask if she’s heard from immigration too often because I know it’s always on her mind.
Jaya needs work, so I help her with a resume. They came here on a boat, and it took two days in a rubber dinghy to get to Australia. Their eldest daughter was two years old on the boat. They ate raw rice for those days in the middle of the ocean. I cannot begin to imagine the fear and desperation, the determination to make a new life for my children and leave behind everyone and everything I had known and loved. That’s not on Jaya’s resume, of course. On Jaya’s resume, there are places, schools and jobs listed from her experiences overseas. An Australian employer might not even have heard of any of these places before. When Jaya lived in the refugee camp, she helped to teach children in the camp. I remember when she was in my AMEP class, and I invited her to share with the class about her homeland. She wrote the intricate alphabet of her home language on the board and taught us how her language worked – its history and sounds and sentence structures. She seemed so at ease in front of the class and was a natural teacher; but how can I help her to express that confidence on a single-page resume in English?

I take her to an aged care facility to ask about volunteer work. “If you are willing to volunteer now, maybe one day they will offer you a paid job there,” I suggest to her. Together, we take the resume to the counter. But when we get there, the receptionist speaks to me instead of to Jaya. “How long has she been here? Has she got a visa? Some of them just want a job so they can get a visa.” The receptionist’s voice is firm, and her gaze is cold and uninviting. I am too shocked to respond at the time. Jaya is standing right next to me, but she doesn’t respond, and I don’t know what to say. “Well, you could ask her yourself,” I want to say to the receptionist. “She can speak English, you know – she’s multilingual!” But I am silent. I’m afraid if I make a scene, Jaya could lose her chance of getting work here.

Jaya and I leave the resume on the counter and go back to my car. I am trying not to cry, but I’m still shaken by the incident with the receptionist. I am apologising – apologising for my country and for my part in the views of who belongs here, and who does not. Jaya smiles at me and brushes it off. “It’s OK,” she says. “Some people – kind. Some people – not.”

I have never experienced the kind of discrimination described in this incident. What upset me as much as the incident itself was Jaya’s resignation to it. It was clear that this was not a new experience for her. She was patient enough to guide me through my emotional response to it: this was simply the way things were for someone who lived as an outsider in a country still dominated by a white, monolingual mindset (Oliver et al., 2017). The experience with Jaya is one that has changed my perspective on my role as a teacher. In the courses I teach, and in my research with teachers, I have an opportunity to open the dialogue around challenging topics of race and language, rather than remain silent. Yes, I teach English and not political science, but I am learning to become comfortable with living in between “the pedagogical and political” (Denzin, 2006, p. 112) in my practice. Denzin (2006) was referring to the practice of ethnography but I wondered how a teacher’s work, like an autoethnographer’s, might be one that could “give voice to people and ideas that might otherwise be voiceless” (Stanley, 2019)?

Critical reflection in my teaching practice: a work in progress

When we write autoethnography, we give voice to others by “re-presenting rather than representing” (Verran, 2021, p. 236) a critical issue in our narratives. Our stories are more
than a record of events observed from a neutral standpoint; rather we write to provoke further reflection and questions about an issue. My critical reflection is an individual process, but I hope that describing this process autoethnographically might generate further reflection around the critical issues that my narratives have sought to highlight. When we teach, we can give voice to others as we engage in critical reflection and acknowledge our position in relation to the content we teach. In my AMEP teaching practice, critical reflection prompted me to be more deliberate about decisions I made in relation to teaching curriculum content.

The other teachers and I are planning a class trip to a national park, to introduce our newly-arrived students to “local history” and places of interest. I’ve been to this national park many times before, as I grew up around here. But it isn’t until I start preparing resources about the class trip that I read more deeply about the history of the area and its importance in Indigenous culture. This place was the site of annual gatherings until the disruption caused by European settlers’ sawmills and transport stopped the gatherings. I think it is important to share history with my students that acknowledges the Indigenous culture of the land we live on, and I wonder how I can convey this in a way, and with English language, that my beginner-level students will be able to understand.

In class, I share an image of a map of Indigenous Australia (AITSIS, 2021), with its many languages and nation groups. When I went to school, I only learned the names of the six states and two territories that made up Australia. I have taught the students in my AMEP class about those six states, two territories and capital cities, but I have never taught them about the 400 or more different groupings represented on the map of Indigenous Australia. Why not? And how do I explain things differently now?

We look at the map of Indigenous Australia, and I explain to my class that these are places and languages. I ask students about different dialects in their home languages and then I draw my arm across the map to try and explain that English is now everywhere in Australia. I expect to spend some time explaining this, but the students seem to understand the idea of culture, language and colonisation without me talking much at all. Of course they do. Their own families and histories bear witness to years of war and linguistic and cultural oppression. The lesson that day is for me, not the students in my class. I am the one who needs to learn about the history of my country.

When I was working in the AMEP, I did not discuss this decision with my teaching colleagues, nor the journey of critical reflection that prompted it. There seemed to be few opportunities for discussion about critical issues at the time I began to work in this particular organisation. Teachers and students were experiencing the pressures of funding and curriculum changes as well as the pressures of increased assessment demands (Button, 2019). While there was a curriculum to follow, decisions about how and what to teach seemed largely overshadowed by the need to prepare students for mandated assessment tasks which were to be completed at set times (for example, once a student had undertaken 100 hours of tuition). These times were nominated as benchmarks to demonstrate students’ English language learning progress, but a learning process is difficult to tie to a timeframe, and generic assessment benchmarks cannot take an individual student’s or teacher’s learning needs into account. Opportunities for
teaching needs to be critically informed about how they would teach curriculum content in their classes, facilitate students’ voices in the decision-making process or engage in dialogue with colleagues around these matters were limited. Perhaps a way forward for teachers in this sector is the creation of professional spaces of inquiry and dialogue to question and consider critical issues. These opportunities for collective discussion can be valuable for teachers to reflect on their own classroom practice. Beyond the individual level of practice, participation in critically-reflective discussion groups also has the potential for teachers to take initiatives towards a more active role in areas of curriculum reform (Stenhouse, 1980).

Critical reflection and autoethnography are a work in progress for me, and the work is a journey of asking questions without necessarily finding many neat and tidy answers to them. I am sure of one thing, though. If I am going to write and research, I will need to do it in the same way as I seek to teach: “not only from the stance of neutrality and distance, but also from the position of caring and vulnerability” (Bochner, 2017, p. 48). A vulnerable position is a place of listening carefully (Brookfield, 2017), where we can learn lessons from those whose voices we did not hear before.

Conclusion

My reflections in this chapter are a snapshot of some of the relationships, incidents, memories, discussions, observations and readings that have shaped my teaching and research practice. Many of these are noted down in reflective journals I have kept since I began teaching in ELT. Keeping a record of your teaching experiences through some form of journalling is a practice that I can recommend if you are new to the journey of critical reflection and autoethnography. I will draw to a close with some final thoughts for reflection and discussion around the themes raised in this chapter.

- Be prepared to have your assumptions challenged, and to see things differently to the way you may have viewed them before. Critical reflection begins when we begin to look at what is familiar through “unfamiliar angles” (Brookfield, 2017, p. 16).
- Allow yourself time to read. Read widely and across different disciplines in educational or theoretical literature if you have the time, as there are always fresh perspectives to gain from fields outside those you are familiar with.
- Find spaces for critical discussion with your colleagues and students. Even if it seems that discussions raise more questions than answers about difficult issues, asking these questions can plant seeds for future change.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the editors and to Stephen Heimans for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this chapter.

Notes

1 Oliver, Rochecouste and Nguyen’s (2017) article outlines the historical context and current directions in ELT in Australia, including in the AMEP, which offers migrant and humanitarian entrants to Australia around 500 hours of English language tuition.
2 Pseudonyms are used throughout.
References


They have lessons to teach me