CHAPTER 63

POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS:

Complementary Approaches to Identity and Culture in ELT

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ABSTRACT

Applied linguistics and poststructuralism offer varied perspectives on language, culture, and identity. The purpose of this chapter is to establish key theoretical and pedagogical contrasts, as well as to sketch out future areas of complementarity. Applied linguists tend to view language as a site in which social and cultural differences are displayed, whereas poststructuralists tend to view language as a vehicle through which differences between and within identity categories (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) are created and realized. By extension, applied linguists often provide rigorous descriptions of particular features (e.g., pragmatic norms, literacy practices) that define minority identities and place students at potential risk. Such mappings, for poststructuralists, are illusory. Language is fundamentally unstable (cf. Derrida’s notion of différance), and identities are multiple, contradictory, and subject to change across settings and through interaction. Representation becomes a crucial area of debate here. Many applied linguists rightfully claim that academic achievement and social justice are advanced when non-dominant varieties of language are systematically described and valorized in schools. Poststructuralists correctly warn, however, that power relations are always implicated when we formalize particular language/identity correlations. Such representations are always shaped by discourses, and are hence “dangerous,” in that they potentially reify the marginal positions and practices that they name.

INTRODUCTION

Applied linguistics (AL) and poststructuralism bring to light divergent and at times conflicting perspectives on language and identity. Exclusive observance of either theoretical framework thus provides only a partial viewpoint on cultural and linguistic diversity. The purpose of this chapter will be to establish key theoretical differences, describe the types of pedagogy they suggest, and in the final sections, sketch out areas of complementarity that enhance theory and practice in the ELT profession.

Forming comparisons between AL and poststructuralism is problematic in several respects. Unlike poststructuralism, AL has a longstanding methodological tradition. Thus, ELT professionals might select aspects of poststructural thought to inform their practice, whereas the reverse would seem unimaginable at this time. Varied paths of development and the lack of consensus they engender further complicate comparison. In North America, for instance, Butler (1992, p. 4) notes a tendency to use poststructuralism as an umbrella term for an eclectic set of theories
lacking coherence by continental standards. In Britain, as well, poststructuralism has been uniquely associated with Marxist thought through the writings of Louis Althusser (Culler, 1997, p. 125).

**APPLIED LINGUISTICS: A BRIEF SURVEY**

As with poststructuralism, AL should not be seen as a unitary or static concept. With growing interest in ideological and interdisciplinary theory, especially over the past decade, AL is experiencing unprecedented plurality in thought and regional/national variation. The preeminence and mainstreaming of Hallidayan systemic-functionalism in Australia, as one example, has yet to occur—if it ever will—in North America where cognitive, task-based, and communicative approaches predominate in ESL curricula.

This raises the critical question of which other academic disciplines, besides linguistics applied (Widdowson, 1980), might provide additional foundations for the future? Grabe, Stoller, and Tardy (2000) identify psychology, anthropology, educational theory, and sociology as particularly strong candidates for language teacher education. For other researchers the major questions relate to the implementation of language teaching approaches rather than to their theoretical foundations: Can teaching methods and materials be generalized across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts (see Holliday, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2003a)? Under what conditions and in which settings might social needs take priority over linguistic ones (Auerbach, 2000; Morgan, 1998; Sauvé, 2000)? Perhaps most important, in a world of social possibilities both conceived and concealed through language, can applied linguistics remain impartial? As Corson (1997) argues, the common “perception that ‘language teaching’ is its central function, may have distorted the epistemological foundations of applied linguistics” (p. 167).

Corson’s (1997) insight underscores the positivistic, paradigmatic assumptions that have often guided AL research: a quest for ultimate rules or universals regarding SLA; a conviction that such rules have a measurable reality or ontology independent of the rational, scientific frames and tools used to discover them; and an assumption that such research methods, if not culturally and ideologically neutral, are at least controllable through experimental design (cf. positivistic vs. naturalistic inquiry, Lynch, 1996). Structuralist principles, as well, are firmly rooted in AL’s modernist foundations. The “deep structure” of mind, unveiled by way of Chomsky’s Universal Grammar, not only has influenced grammars of a pedagogical bent (e.g., Cook, 1994) but also has underpinned an SLA research agenda that is heavily psycholinguistic rather than ethnographic, sociolinguistic, or ideological in orientation (e.g., Norton, 2000; Rampton, 1995; Roberts et al., 2001). More generally, Saussure’s descriptive privileging of a decontextualized, ahistorical system, *la langue*, over individual use and creativity, *la parole*, gives rise to a mindset in which system-building and comprehensive modeling (e.g., word corpuses, taxonomies of learner strategies, hierarchies of closely-specified task descriptors, etc.) are highly valued.

Arguably, this structuralist and positivist convergence is most responsible for “the consistent anonymising, if not the actual eclipsing, of the learner” (Candlin, 2000, p. xiii). By this is meant that the learner comes to stand for the system—be it mind, language, or culture—and the language he or she produces is abstracted,
analyzed, and categorized as a reflection of the system’s timeless and general properties. Lost in this “primordial” (Appadurai, 1996), “essentialized” (Kubota, 1999), or “received” (Atkinson, 1999) model is an understanding of how individuals use language to differentiate themselves or to resist and transform their categorization. By making the system more “real” than those who use it, language professionals yield to the epistemological trap identified by Corson: a preoccupation with language as an end-in-itself, rather than a vehicle for self-discovery and social transformation.

**POSTSTRUCTURALISM: A CONCEPTUAL SURVEY**

In defining poststructuralism, there is no small irony in attributing foundations to an intellectual field noted for its antifoundationalism and deep suspicion of system-building in any form (see Butler, 1992; Sarap, 1993; Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralism is “postmodern” in its critique of universal notions of objectivity, progress, and reason. A weakening of scientific hegemony marks this conceptual shift. Whereas modernist educators (i.e., conservative, liberal, or Marxist) tend to view science as a tool to challenge inequalities, postmodern educators tend to view science—or one version of science (i.e., positivism)—as partial knowledge, and if applied too generally, a potential source of injustice. This partiality, in turn, increases the validity of situated and dialogical forms of knowledge (see Benesch, 1999; Canagarajah, 2002, 2005; Carr, 2003; Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005; Lather & Ellsworth, 1996; Wells, 1999; Wong, 2000).

Poststructuralism is similarly postmodern in its attentiveness to the dynamics and disjunctures of social categories. Concepts such as performativity (Butler, 1990), cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), transnational, diasporic identities (Appadurai, 1996), and nomadology (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) highlight this focus on the creative and composite dimensions of experience, a perspective embraced by a growing number of language researchers. Zamel’s (1997) use of transculturation, Kransch’s (1993) concept of interculturality, Rampton’s (1995) study of crossings, and Johnston’s (1999) depiction of expatriate EFL teachers as postmodern paladins are notable examples.

A postmodern preoccupation with language is also evident in the provocative use of grammatical metaphors and neologisms in publications. Street (1993), for instance, argues that culture needs to be de-nominalized, recast as a verb to counter its reification. Similarly, Kransch (2000) details an immigrant experience that “gets languaged after the fact” (p. 136). And the hybrid term glocalization (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2002; Pakir, 2000) serves to illustrate local articulations of global processes. Though such glosses might seem trivial or merely playful, they are a reflection of the so-called linguistic turn in postmodernism, an increased sensitivity to language-conditioned understandings.

While postmodern in spirit, poststructuralism is distinctively post-Saussurian (see Belsey, 1980; Cherryholmes, 1988; Weedon, 1987). In Saussure’s semiotics, nothing inside the mind or outside language accounts for the “arbitrary” binding of signifier (a sound or graphic image) and signifies (the concept designated) in a sign’s operation. The meanings we attach to words/signs are produced within language through differences between other signs in a self-regulating language system. Poststructuralists, particularly through the work of Derrida (1982), utilize
these ideas but radicalize them by amplifying the system’s dynamism and instability: “In a language, in the system of language there are only differences...on the one hand, these differences play: in language...On the other hand, these differences are themselves effects. They have not fallen from the sky fully formed, ...[nor are they] prescribed in the gray matter of the brain” (p. 11). Through this “play of differences” (cf. différence, Derrida), neutrality and objectivity in Saussure’s ordered system is undermined: meanings become provisional and the boundaries between linguistic and extralinguistic factors erased. Instead of focusing on intrinsic properties of words, or relations within a fixed system, poststructuralists often investigate extrinsic conditions—the social intentions of language users—in their critical analyses of texts.

Texts attain a similar provisional status, one tied closely to the process of their production rather than their reference to worldly phenomena. Texts are deconstructed, read against themselves in order to reveal their aporias (i.e., self-generated paradoxes) and to expose the techniques and social interests in their construction (e.g., Norris, 1982; Terdiman, 1985). A novel or theory that at first glance might appear to be the cohesive product of a single writer becomes pluralized, revealing a number of competing and complementary social voices that vie for a reader’s attention (cf. heteroglossia, Bakhtin, 1981). The purpose of reading changes accordingly: no longer passive recipients of an author’s intentions, readers become active producers of a text’s “authorial” meanings (see Barthes, 1988; Cherryholmes, 1993; Scholes, 1985). The meanings created, however, are not unconstrained. Texts are always intertextual (Bazerman, 2004), their production and circulation taking place in a linguistic “marketplace” that values particular language practices and stigmatizes others (cf. symbolic capital, Bourdieu, 1991).

These ways of conceptualizing language and texts are then transposed upon identity. In so far as meanings are produced within language, “meanings” of self and others are produced within discourses—systems of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1982) that regulate and assign value to all forms of semiotic activity for instance, oral/written texts, gestures, images, spaces, and their multimodal integration (e.g., Gee, 1996; Harklau, 2003; Kress, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Pennycook, 2001; Stein, 2004; Toohey, 2000). In so far as language is provisional and indeterminate, self-understanding, or subjectivity (e.g., Foucault; Norton, 2000), is viewed as having comparable instability in its discursive realization. No longer the center or rational source of understanding, the individual becomes “de-centered”—in part, “spoken” by the language he or she uses, even at the level of the unconscious (cf. Lacan’s psychoanalytics, in Sarap, 1993; Granger, 2004; Weedon, 1987). The individual similarly becomes textualized, his or her “private” experiences deconstructed to reveal the discourses that have produced them. Poststructuralists, however, conceptualize the determination of subjectivity as partial or incomplete in that discourses also create the possibilities for autonomy and resistance (cf. agency, Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko, 2002; Price, 1999).

The continual play of differences assigned to language serves as inspiration for an active and relational “politics of difference” (Pennycook, 2001) within and between social categories. Through Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity, in particular, the “differencing” of identity becomes a permanent condition, whose significance for education has attracted growing research attention (Alexander, Anderson, & Gallegos, 2005; Morgan, 2004a; Nelson, 1999; Pennycook, 2004).
Performative utterances, following Austin (1975), do not describe prior or existing conditions (cf. constatives) but instead create that which they name in language (e.g., “let the games begin”). In a famous passage, Butler (1990) reworks Austin’s concept to describe gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33). Simply put, gender is an effect of what we do (in large part with language) and not just who we are (e.g., Cameron, 1997; Ehrlich, 1997). Identity, by extension, is fundamentally a social practice.

These poststructural ideas on language and identity have several strategic implications for ELT. Firstly, theories of culture and identity should not be judged on their internal merits alone—as things-in-themselves—but also in relation to their origins, exclusions (i.e., “subjugated knowledges,” Foucault, 1980, pp. 82-83), and local articulations (e.g., Lin & Luk, 2002). SLA theory, for example, is seen through Norton Peirce’s (1995) landmark study as an individualizing discourse, one that has conceptually isolated the language learner from the language-learning context. Attitudinal and motivational profiles, in Norton’s view, fail to capture the complex desires and social power relations that shape communication and restrict access to target language speakers and authentic speech situations. Drawing on Bourdieu, Norton (2000) reconceptualizes L2 learning as a shared responsibility and expands the definition of L2 competence to include claiming “the right to speak” and “the power to impose reception” (p. 8).

Similar strategies pertain to all methods and materials. The language rules and behaviors they claim to embody are no longer viewed as independent “facts” but, instead, as effects of discourses. Classrooms, thus, become sites of power relations that work on and through individuals as well as through the microtechnologies of ELT (e.g., Harklau, 2000; Kubota, 2001; Lynch, 2001; Toohey, 2000). Language standards, curricula, and assessment tools, in this perspective, are no longer appraised solely for the outcomes they enable but also for the identities or subject positions they constitute—the limited English proficiency (LEP) student or the non-native-speaker (NNS) teacher, as examples. Once made “visible” by discourse, prescribed “inadequacies” are then transferred onto those labeled, setting into motion a wide range of normalizing strategies (e.g., expert interventions, forms of remediation, professional marginalization). Although some resist, others produce forms of self-understanding that accord with the subject positions that a particular discourse presents: a student labeled LEP, for example, might come to accept the notion that the prior knowledge he or she brings to school is “backwards” and that a dead-end job is all that the future holds.

Concepts such as power/knowledge, discourse, subjectivity, and performativity clearly amplify the presence of power relations in ELT and underpin the need for critical pedagogies in language education (e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2004; Reagan & Osborn, 2002). This intensification of power, however, has both positive and negative ramifications. On the positive side, poststructural educators apply reflexive checks and balances on emergent power relations (cf. problematizing practice, Pennycook, 2001; Benesch, 2001) that more instrumental orientations would view as superfluous. The status of teachers is also enhanced in that the poststructural ontology of situatedness assigns teachers a decisive role in creating pedagogies of transformation (cf. collaborative vs. coercive relations of power, Cummins, 2001).
On the negative side, the pervasiveness of power, so theorized, can be destabilizing: new teachers, for example, may become overly cautious, worried that their next lesson may inadvertently silence minority students. Also, there is the danger that power becomes overdetermined, projected onto settings or activities in which its explanatory value may be marginal. What such concerns speak to is the need for a poststructuralism more grounded in the specifics of ELT research and practice.

Although desirable, a constructive dialogue between AL and poststructuralism is potentially problematic. Such collaboration, on the one hand, suggests an expansive and exciting range of conceptual possibilities. On the other, it may contribute to an excess of theoreticism and abstraction from which only a select few might seek guidance. In order to realize the former and minimize the latter, ELT professionals should keep in mind what is specifically at stake: how we understand and relate to those whose interests we claim to serve. The following sections will elaborate on this issue.

MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

Culture in ELT: Concepts and Definitions

The importance attached to the concept of culture is reflected in a growing wealth of journal articles, books, and anthologies that have addressed various aspects of cultural knowledge and interaction as they pertain to ELT (e.g., Alfred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Atkinson, 2004; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Corson, 2001; Courchène, 1996; Hall, 2002; Hinkel, 1999; Ilieva, 2000; Kransch, 1993, 1998; McKay, 2000; Moran, 2001; Morgan & Cain, 2000; Ronowicz & Yallop, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Schecter & Bailey, 2002; Valdes, 1986). This recent expansion of cultural materials can be seen, on the one hand, as acknowledgment of the concept’s importance in language education, while on the other, as a response to a tendency to invoke culture in commonsensical ways. This tendency, as Byram and Risager (1999) note, reflects the fact while “many curriculum documents urge [teachers] to develop cultural awareness and knowledge of other countries and cultures, … there is no discussion of what concept of culture underpins the documents themselves” (p. 83).

Such concerns are addressed in Atkinson’s (1999) comprehensive survey of the culture concept in TESOL. Three perspectives, in Atkinson’s article, demarcate this field: (a) an earlier “received” view, which is still prominent in the profession; (b) a “middle ground” approach that questions many “received” assumptions; and (c) a postmodern-inspired, “critical” approach that fundamentally questions the basis and purpose of cultural knowledge in the field. The following discussion borrows and expands upon the first and third categories.

A received view, following Atkinson (1999), treats cultures as “geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behavior” (p. 626). Culture understood in this way can become an explanatory crutch for those aspects of classroom experience beyond a teacher’s current expertise. The problem can be even more acute for new teachers trained in a single methodological framework. Any “problems” that occur outside this frame are likely viewed as cultural in origin rather than pedagogical in effect. In this way, the
“unteachable” student comes to reflect the exotic and inscrutable “Other” of orientalist tradition (Said, 1978), whose “limitations” are attributed to ingrained cultural traits inimical to progress. Kubota’s (1999, 2004) work has been particularly insightful in alerting educators to the dangers inherent in the stereotypical dichotomies of cultures and classrooms often disseminated through AL research.

Students can be “Othered” or “exoticized” even by well-meaning teachers sensitized to notions of diversity. The “simplification of culture,” Bissoondath’s (1994) controversial critique of official multiculturalism in Canada, draws attention to a troubling pedagogical habit of reducing differences to superficial displays of food, fashion, and festivals. “Culture Disnified,” Bissoondath’s (1994) provocative description of Canadian practices, also portends global developments in the lingua franca functions of World English (e.g., Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Knapp & Meierkord, 2002), whereby culture increasingly becomes commoditized, conceived and taught as a “value-adding” set of sociopragmatic skills for cross-cultural entrepreneurship (e.g., Block, 2002; Cameron, 2002; Corson, 2002; Kramsch, 2000).

A received view of culture is discernible in many other areas of AL: in the description of paralinguistic (e.g., elements of style such as tone, pitch, volume) and extralinguistic differences (e.g., proxemics, kinesics, etc.) attributed to race, culture, and gender categories (e.g., Chaika, 1994); in the cataloging of cross-cultural or interracial pragmatic norms that contribute to miscommunication (cf. interactional sociolinguistics, Gumperz, 1986); in the explication of prototypical forms of writing based on cultural traditions (cf. contrastive rhetoric studies, Casanave, 2004, Ch. 2; Connor, 1996); or in the description of internal states and motivational inadequacies (e.g., “culture shock”), reference to which “explain” students’ inabilities to acquire an L2 or acculturate to dominant norms (e.g., Brown, 1986).

Through the wisdom of postmodern hindsight, one might dismiss such work for its inattention to power relations and its overreliance on positivistic research, but this would be unfair, in many cases. Sociolinguists such as Gumperz and Labov, for example, set out to demonstrate that the academic underachievement of minority students was not the product of culturally and linguistically deprived home or community environments. Through systematic data collection and formal description—the hallmarks of scientificity—they hoped to convince the public of the legitimacy of non-dominant varieties of language and the need for schools to respect and support such differences (e.g., Corson, 2001, Ch. 3 & 4). Nonetheless, scientific rigor has not stemmed the fear of cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity that underpins opposition to bilingual education and Ebonics instruction in parts of the U.S.A. In this respect, a “received” view of national identity—a dominant ideology of homogeneity and monolingualism—supersedes its multilingual and multiracial realities (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Dicker, 2000; Perry & Delpit, 1998).

A critical view offers strong points of contrast, many of them distinctively postmodern. Cultural practices and forms are seen as dynamic and context sensitive rather than static and universal. Similarly, causal relations between language and culture are reversed or understood as mutually constitutive. Culture is seen as not simply the source of meaning-making activities, but also its effect. Modes of expression (i.e., words, images, rituals, etc.) come to shape, dialogically, how individual and collective experiences are conceptualized and retained (e.g., Morgan & Cain, 2000). These emphases on change, complexity, and locality take us away
from conventional notions of cultures as homogeneous and bound to specific nations, regions, or languages on a one-to-one basis.

A critical view also seeks to understand students’ cultural activity in a world progressively “shrinking” in fundamental ways: Money, information systems, and populations are more mobile than ever and increasingly concentrated in major cosmopolitan centers noted for their ethnic, racial, and linguistic pluralism (e.g., Blackledge, 2002; Goldstein, 2003; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In English-dominant metropolises such as London, New York, Toronto, and Sydney, ESL programs struggle to remain relevant for newcomers who, in a sense, live transnational, juxtaposed lives (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Harris, Leung, & Rampton, 2002) in which geographical distances are instantaneously bridged through global communications media (i.e., the Internet, telephone, movies, newspapers) and life “abroad” is eased by an abundance of services and employment possibilities in students’ L1.

The world is also shrinking in frightening and dangerous ways. Political violence against civilian populations seems to be escalating, and as recently demonstrated in Iraq, overwhelming military superiority—and the political and cultural insularity it provides its owners—can be decisively and unilaterally imposed anywhere, followed closely by the symbols and values of the triumphant. For those without such power, assimilative pressures can be more acutely felt, and resistance, of necessity, is more covert and often cultural and linguistic in form. With English now globalized, the question that remains is the extent to which it can be “decolonized,” locally appropriated in ways that challenge the political and economic hegemony of dominant nations, as well as respect vernacular forms of knowledge and literacy (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999, 2005; Cooke, 1999; Hornberger, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2003b; Mair, 2003; Pennycook, 1998; Ramanathan, 2005).

Cultural continuity, in the face of current realities, becomes an intensely active and relational process. Traditions are retraditionalized, acquiring new or additional meanings by which important differences are maintained. Yet the maintenance of such “differences,” particularly in liberal democratic societies, can become strategically extra-cultural in response to national ideologies and globalization pressures (e.g. Fleming, 2003; Hall, 2002; Heller, 2003). In Canada, for example, Williams (1998) notes the growth of astute and well-organized groups who view official multiculturalism as “a set of institutional opportunities for individual and group advancement in a competitive environment” (p. 26). Liberal democracies, in general, tend to undermine traditional ties and encourage greater cultural experimentation and syncretism through the promotion of values such as individualism, secularism, and cultural relativism in legal and educational institutions. Second language teachers, who perceive or present such values as universal, unwittingly increase students’ own sense of alienation and foreignness in their new surroundings (e.g., Johnston, 2003).

In contrast to its received precursor, a critical, postmodern perspective of culture is a highly complex notion, one that seeks to unveil “the fissures, inequalities, disagreements, and cross-cutting influences that exist in and around all cultural scenes, in order to banish once and for all that cultures are monolithic entities, or in some cases anything important at all” (Atkinson, 1999, p. 627). For ELT professionals, the images proffered here might appear so fleeting that their realization within language curricula would seem careless. Yet such perceptual
obstacles reflect, in large part, SLA and AL traditions. To reiterate, a received view of culture in the form of timeless facts, reified learner profiles, and essentialized literacy and discourse norms is still pervasive and not easily overcome. In received approaches to pedagogy, students are encouraged to exchange what they already know (i.e., cultural facts). Critical approaches, in contrast, foreground cultural reflexivity as a pedagogical goal, encouraging students to discover what they don’t know—about themselves, their cultural “others,” and the social forces that shape intercultural understanding (e.g., Carr, 2003; Corbett, 2003; Cummins, 2001; Kramsch, 1993; MacPherson, et al., 2004; Nieto, 2002; Young, 1996).

**Poststructural Critique: Culture or Identity?**

As detailed by Belz (2002), Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001), McNamara (1997), Norton (2000), Pavlenko (2002), Pennycook (2001), and Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005), the construct of **identity** has been theorized in numerous ways, through sociopsychological frames (cf. Tajfel, 1974), interactional sociolinguistics (cf. Gumperz, 1986), and postmodern approaches such as feminist poststructuralism (cf. Weedon, 1987; Norton, 2000), and queer theory (cf. Butler, 1990; Nelson, 1999, 2002), as examples. Adding further complexity, identity is often aligned with premodifiers such as social, cultural, sociocultural, or ethnic in ELT publications, the substance of which only offer brief, if any, categorical distinctions.

In evaluating current developments, a critical, postmodern view of culture (Atkinson, 1999) has much in common with the poststructural framework outlined in this chapter. Indeed, Norton’s (2000) often quoted depiction of identity as “multiple and contradictory” and “a site of struggle” (p.127) bears close resemblance to the cultural “fissures, inequalities, [and] disagreements” described by Atkinson (p. 627). Thus, a pertinent question would be, “Do poststructural theories of identity seek to replace the concept of culture or weaken its importance?” In recent publications such as the Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, and in special issues of **TESOL Quarterly** (1997, Vol. 31, No. 3; 1999, Vol. 33, No. 3) and the **International Journal of Bilingualism** (2001, Vol. 5, No. 3), those inspired by poststructural ideas tend to use identity not so much to replace culture but to broaden its implications or critique its use in ELT.

Norton’s (1997) feminist poststructural construct of **investment** brings to light some of the subtle distinctions implied: “The construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex history and multiple desires. An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own social identity, which changes across time and place” (p. 411). The multiplicity and complexity of Norton’s construct foregrounds heterogeneity. It reminds us that while culture is important, it is not necessarily primary, separable, or more salient than other experiences and desires. When students interact with native speakers, they are “constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton, 2000, p. 11). The “force” of culture in such reorganization may only be marginal or, in specific situations, so tightly interwoven with other influences as to be largely indistinguishable.

Ibrahim’s (1999) study of African youth in Canada is a notable example. In Africa, his participants defined themselves through personal qualities and national,
ethnic, and linguistic affiliations. Once in Canada, however, they are racialized, compelled to enter “a discursive space or representation in which they are already constructed, imagined, and positioned...as Blacks” (p. 353). Thus, they become Black, negotiating a new identity for themselves through the repeated “performance” (cf. Butler, 1990) of cultural practices such as rap, hip-hop, and Black English, which offer them a recognizable history, politics, and collective memory in the North American context. While creating new solidarities, however, these positionings also create new liminalities in that the women in Ibrahim’s study “misrecognize” themselves in the misogynistic lyrics and videos of many rap songs.

Ibrahim’s study is indicative of poststructural preferences: dynamic and overlapping categories (i.e., culture, race, class, and gender), contingencies over continuities, identities created in language and not just displayed, and power relations operating on and through the formation of subjectivities. These concerns are not exclusive to identity nor are their possible absence inherent to culture. But concepts, similar to identities, live discursive lives, and in spite of current postmodern trappings (i.e., transculturation, hybridity, interculturality, third spaces) the culture concept may always carry its “received” associations in ELT that potentially conceal more than they reveal.

For poststructural researchers in AL, the key question is not just “What is culture?” but rather “What does it do?” What forms of knowledge does it enable? And what does it diminish or hide? Poststructuralists, in common cause with critical multiculturalists (e.g., Kubota, 1999, 2004; May, 1999) and critical race theorists (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999), worry that a preoccupation with cultural issues can become a form of “power erasure” (e.g., Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997), disguising systemic inequalities connected to race, class, sexual orientation, or gender relations in society.

Such inequalities mark the treatment of teachers defined as non-native speaking (NNS) in ELT (e.g., Braine, 1999). As Amin (1999) persuasively argues, many ESL students perceive the ideal teacher of English to be a white, Anglo male, irrespective of his actual TESL experience. Speaking a dominant variety of English, he is seen and heard as “accentless” and the natural possessor of the appropriate culture knowledge to teach the language. As a woman of color, and a speaker of Pakistani-English, Amin’s legitimacy as an ESL teacher is often questioned, requiring her to adopt teaching strategies in which her authority is less likely to be challenged. This last point is instructive as to how white privilege is systematically organized and concealed within a profession. Specifically, the types of learner-centered, participatory practices that currently define an exemplary teacher in ELT are also the types of practices that are often the least available—or most dangerous—for NNS teachers and teachers of color.

For poststructural educators, then, culture is important insofar as it is understood in relation to wider sets of experiences and discursive practices. As Pennycook (1997) argues:

Culture determines how social reality is understood; it is a site of primary importance. This is not to deny the importance of a material world, of social or economic relations, but to emphasize that these have no meaning outside their cultural interpretations. What I want to pursue ... is the notion of a pedagogy of cultural alternatives, an educational project that seeks to open up alternative ways of thinking and being in the world. (p. 47)
In Pennycook’s project, culture serves pedagogy primarily through its illumination and translation of broader social processes. By acting on, or “problem-posing” (e.g., Freire, 1997), cultural experiences, critical practitioners hope to demystify social “realities” and the intimidating sense of permanence that fortifies existing inequities. The assumption guiding this strategy is that possibilities for change must first be imagined at a personal, experiential level before they can be achieved (e.g., Simon, 1992). Whether we explore the notion of culture or that of identity, a poststructural syllabus represents a major shift in priorities—from pedagogies of inclusion to pedagogies of transformation.

CURRENT DEBATES AND CONCERNS

Reflexivity and the Politics of Pedagogy

By recasting power as power/knowledge, and by its valorization of voice, resistance, and agency, poststructuralism places a notion of politics at the center of teaching around culture and identity formation. Poststructural teachers would argue that by “politicizing” pedagogy, they are addressing a reality that is part of all language education and one that many or most ELT professionals wish to deny. Nonetheless, pursuing “alternative ways of thinking and being” is not without potential repercussions for students. In-group members may be quite happy with the status quo and may resent fellow group members who publicly voice alternatives. Those who express such views risk isolation and loss of crucial support networks. Educators who engage in transformative pedagogies acknowledge these concerns and try to limit them through sustained reflection on their own assumptions and heightened awareness of unintended consequences that may arise from their teaching practices.

Critical reflexivity is a term used to describe this cautionary strategy, which “makes particular forms of knowledge themselves objects of study, asking where they came from, what they are like, and how they got that way” (Giltrow & Colhoun, 1992, p. 60). Reflexive techniques can vary, from introspection (e.g., personal narratives) to more empirical-analytical techniques (e.g., critical discourse analyses of program curricula and materials) (e.g., Benesch, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Morgan, 2002; Pennycook, 2001; Ramanathan, 2002; Vandrick, 1999). Through poststructuralism, reflexive practices engage more closely with the formation of teacher identities through institutional discourses.

In much the same way we think of students being “cultural”—having particular worldviews and habits of thought—so are teachers as a result of their socialization into ELT through their teacher education programs and professional participation. As recent studies by Ramanathan (2002) and Varghese (2004) emphasize, language teacher education programs evolve in divergent ways, embodying internal conversations and disputes. The theoretical creativity that arises underpins a key poststructural tenet: Teachers do not acquire common “truths” about ELT as much as they attain a particular understanding of their field—a discourse composed of both insights and blind spots. The theories and methods teachers learn, accordingly, are a potential form of cultural politics when exported across settings. Critical reflexivity, in this perspective, encourages teachers to explore the partiality of their knowledge and to maintain a “skeptical eye towards assumptions, ideas that have
become ‘naturalized,’ [and] notions that are no longer questioned” (cf. problematizing givens, Pennycook, 2001, p. 7).

Vandrick’s (1999) personal narrative demonstrates the types of critical connections that reflexivity supports. Looking back on her missionary upbringing in India, Vandrick reevaluates her memories through her current experiences as an ESL teacher. She acknowledges “the unconscious racism that infects almost everyone with privilege, including ‘colonial’ privilege” (p. 70) and poses “the possibility of a ‘colonial shadow’ over our profession” (p. 63) in the form of condescending attitudes towards students and beliefs in the inherent superiority of English.

For Benesch (2001), reflexive, problematizing practices infuse every aspect of her critical approach to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Cases of student resistance—several male students resented her selection of anorexia as a research topic—are addressed in a principled, self-reflective way that reforms curricula (e.g., topic choices in critical EAP, Ch. 4). As she recognizes, “provoking a desire to interrogate the status quo…is not achieved by critical teachers imposing their vision or political agenda on students” (p. 51). Instead, Benesch’s pedagogy emphasizes dialogue and the importance of balancing pragmatic issues with transformative ones in the university context (cf. “needs” vs. “rights” analyses). “Questioning the theory, practice, content and politics of one’s own experiments,” according to Benesch (2001, p. 142), is an essential aspect of critical pedagogy.

A question of intense debate can be posed in the following way: Do critical reflexive practices provide adequate safeguards for teachers that act on culture and identity in their classrooms? Sower (1999), in a critique of Kubota’s (1999) article, is unreserved in his negative assessment:

The application of postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and critical multiculturalism to English language teaching is just an exercise in word games….As for, critical multiculturalism, introducing an explicitly political agenda into the classroom is dangerous. Of course, postmodernists would have us believe that everything is political, so abandoning any attempt at objectivity is only natural, but I beg to differ. (p. 742)

Sower is not alone in viewing postmodern theories as a license for irresponsibility in education (e.g., Constas, 1998). Indeed, Derrida’s deconstructionism seems to invite, in some readers, a sense that there is nothing “real” outside of language and texts. Some of Foucault’s ideas—the production of “truth” within discourse, for example (1980, p. 131)—have been narrowly perceived as condoning an “anything goes” antirealism. Such readings do provide an extreme form of relativism that underpins particular strands of postmodern thought (cf. skeptical postmodernism, Rosenau, 1992; nihilistic deconstructive postmodernism, Shea, 1998). But by reducing all postmodernism to particular elements, Sower demonstrates a highly selective understanding of that which he criticizes. Besides, Foucault was not interested in abandoning objectivity, per se, as much as he was concerned with how “objectivities” are discursively produced and circulated within specific fields such as ELT and how they act on people in ways that potentially restrict their freedoms (e.g., Foucault, 1982; Rouse, 1994).

These two views on objectivity bring to light fundamental paradigmatic distinctions. Sower’s (1999) stance is decidedly positivistic, a bipolar world in which objectivity and relativism are counterposed: “If we are freed from the requirements of scientific observation and truth, then we are left with only stories”
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(p. 737). Poststructuralists would argue that “scientific observation and truth” are themselves “stories,” cultural stories of a Western European tradition—stories that can easily slide into a dangerous political agenda, especially when their general neutrality is presumed across different sites of practice.

A most striking example is Giltrow and Colhoun’s (1992) chapter “The Culture of Power: ESL Traditions, Mayan Resistance,” an incisive study of how ELT is sometimes perceived and, in this case, confronted by a specific group of students. What might appear “scientific” and benign was, for these students, ethnocentric and offensive, a “system which had captured them and their speech, for purposes of ranking, scoring, and screening…. Acutely sensitive to the political and colonial implications of language acquisition, our informants detected the operation of power” (Giltrow & Colhoun, p. 55). This reverse ethnography, of sorts, is a deeply troubling portrait of ELT, on the one hand, and noticeably ambivalent, on the other. The authors offer neither solutions nor broadsides to the effect “everything is political,” nor do they pick “winners” in a head-to-head competition between competing ideologies. Moreover, Giltrow and Colhoun are skeptical regarding the claims to be made on behalf of critical reflexivity. Students “may become even more shadowy and negligible in new critical approaches than they are in traditional approaches which portray them in statistical and positivistic colors” (p. 61).

In this last quote we come to the crux of the matter. If poststructural educators do believe that “everything is political,” then they are prone to an “unreflexive” complacency in which all students become, in effect, “shadowy” remnants of discourses. Certainly, a student’s individuality is diminished, but so are his or her practical interests. When “everything is political,” in an undifferentiated way, conceptual rigor is sacrificed. Without a sense of how the internal parts of a system—such as a university—are coordinated, teachers lose sight of the specificities of power, the particular subsystems that are the most responsive to positive changes at any given time (e.g., Benesch, 2001). Teaching, as a result, may have much less bearing on helping students negotiate their circumstances.

The counterargument, however, that neutrality can be predetermined or guaranteed, also breeds complacency. Such presumptions, following Giltrow and Colhoun (1992), are highly problematic. Drawing from poststructuralism, positivistic-minded teachers would do well to adopt a more situated ethics—an awareness of the contingencies by which instruments of “objectivity” (i.e. methods, materials, assessment tools, research techniques) become “technologies of power” (e.g., Foucault, 1997). Poststructural teachers, in turn, would do well to refine their own situated understanding. While learning about the specificities of power, for example, they might also explore the limits of power as a source of explanation and a guide to relations with students, an argument persuasively made by Bill Johnston (2003) in his wide-ranging study of values in ELT. The issue Johnston raises here should not be seen as a choice—one chooses to be either political or moral—but rather as a reminder that the centrality and intimacy of teacher-student relations in education, as Cummins (2000, 2001) also emphasizes, may require teachers to be both.

Whether we think of ourselves as poststructuralists or psycholinguists, ideologists or pragmatists, deterministic thinking can linger in various forms, many of which remain stubbornly unresponsive to the spirit of reflexivity. As ELT professionals, then, it is necessary to continuously ask ourselves which conceptual
models or their combination help us address our students in all their uniqueness and complexity, rather than as purely instances of mental states, cultural rules, or effects of discourses.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Out of the linguistic turn, characteristic of postmodernism, a “pedagogical turn” specific to educational fields can be seen taking root. Giroux (1994), for example, raises the need to “understand pedagogy as a mode of cultural criticism for questioning the very conditions under which knowledge and identities are produced” (p. 280). For ELT, the implications of this “turn” are many, and they suggest several areas of constructive dialogue between poststructuralism and AL research.

From AL, poststructural educators might explore representational options that are more form-focused and linguistic, following the work of Janks (1997) and Poynton (1993), both of whom provide needed analytical rigor to understanding the lexical, grammatical, and textual elements that underpin the positioning of subjects in discourse. Regarding identity negotiation, poststructural educators might also examine the degree to which classroom instruction in an L2 constitutes different ways of being and knowing in the world. Such inquiry would build on a growing body of research that examines poststructural ideas in multilingual and bilingual contexts (e.g., Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001).

From poststructuralism, AL researchers are alerted to a plurality of coexisting goals in any pedagogical activity. An L2 grammar, vocabulary, or writing activity may, at one level, enunciate linguistic forms or textual prototypes; but at another, the same activity for participants becomes a site of identity negotiation in which engagement with formal genres and L2 forms shapes the self-perception and retention of students’ experiences (e.g., Starfield, 2002; Ivanič, 1998; Kramsch, 2000; Morgan, 2002, 2004b). Discursive perspectives on student resistance and agency also benefit teachers in how they identify and respond to “problem” students. Again, there are several poststructural-informed studies in ELT to build upon (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999; Giltrow & Colhoun, 1992; Harklau, 2003; Toohey, 2000).

These dialogic examples draw attention to the relative uniqueness of ELT settings and practices. Given this uniqueness, ELT professionals might consider the distinctive, theoretical contributions to be made through future collaboration. In conceptualizing language, culture, and cognition, for example, poststructural semiotics and psychoanalytics may provide critical insights that invigorate sociocultural theory (e.g., Lantolf, 2000) and community of practice (COP) models (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Though complementary (e.g., Toohey, 2000, Ch. 1), each theory provides distinctive foci on power and agency. From a poststructural perspective, COP and sociocultural models might be criticized for exaggerating the internal cohesion and cooperation of collectivities and for understating the operation of discourse and power through the communication of group norms. In addition, sociocultural theorists may assign individuals a degree of autonomy and self-awareness greater than that assigned to poststructural subjects (e.g., Morgan, 2004a, pp. 183-184; Walkerdine, 1997). From COP and sociocultural perspectives, poststructural theories of identity might be criticized for overstating the dynamic, multiple, and contested
nature of subjectivity. That is, while change has always been a recognized aspect of personal and collective experience, continuity and cohesion are far more prevalent phenomena and are, thus more valid research priorities.

Future dialogue may emphasize points of convergence between these models. Still, the implications of their differences are worth investigating in the context of ELT pedagogy. If the past is any indication, however, future dialogue between ELT theorists will be less cumbersome than genuine dialogue between theorists and practitioners. For both poststructural and AL researchers, further insights to be gained from a “pedagogical turn” will be dependent on equitable collaboration with teachers.

REFERENCES


