Beyond Buzzy Bees and Kiwi Fruit: Constructing Culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

Teachers of English language skills in Aotearoa New Zealand are also implicitly teachers of a variety of 'cultures,' among which there is often a notional, national 'Kiwi' culture. As large numbers of migrants and refugees continue to settle in this country, accepted notions of Aotearoa New Zealand identity and culture are continually being challenged and renegotiated. For teachers of courses about Aotearoa New Zealand society and culture, this increasing social and cultural complexity needs to be integrated. The same is true for the opportunity for individual learners to reflect on their personal experience of aspects of the society and culture. The study on which this paper is based set out to explore the discursive construction of culture in the experience of adult learners in Year 2 of a BA course in English as an Additional Language (EAL). Data were drawn from learners' reflective journals written while taking part in a community placement. Two main areas of literature underpin the study, firstly analysis of teaching culture in terms of liberal and critical multiculturalism (Kubota 2001, 2004, Kubota & Lin 2006); secondly exploration of social identity and language as a place of identity construction (Norton Pierce 1995,2000,2008; Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000 and Pavlenko, 2002). The study also reflects on the pedagogy used for teaching culture and society in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Background

Teachers of English language skills are implicitly teachers of varying kinds of 'cultures'. These cultures may be institutional, organisational, social, or academic (Van Dijk, 1995). For teachers of migrants and refugees, the task of providing students with information about the country that they have made a commitment to involves teaching culture in broader terms. Chuang (in Fong and Chuang 2004) discusses culture and cultural identity in terms of "nationality; race, ethnicity, gender, life-style choices, organisations, age, class, group membership, regional identity and spiritual identity" (p.65). These characteristics of cultural identity, according to Chuang, are "dynamic, fluid, dialectical, relational, contextual and multifaceted" (p.65). This complex and nuanced description of culture informs this exploration of learners' experiences of New Zealand society and culture.

Those English language teachers who overtly teach 'culture' have recently been challenged to become more aware of how they frame and teach its different aspects (Cotazzi and Jin 1999; Dlaska 2000; Pennycook 1998, 2001). This is a complex area and a number of studies have explored the impact of aspects of

culture on English language learners, including Goldstein (1995), McKay and Wong (1996) and Ibrahim (1999). These studies have highlighted the importance of teachers being aware of contextual and social factors in making judgements about language acquisition and proficiency.

A clearly articulated challenge to teachers of language and culture comes from Kubota (2001). She sees English language teachers as active participants in constructing and consuming various images of world cultures, including their own. She believes teachers of English language are generally well-meaning and humanitarian in their attitudes to their students. However, she encourages them to look critically at their perceptions of cultural differences "or the images of ourselves and peoples of other cultures" (p.32). Teachers, she argues, need to be aware that their perceptions of culture do not reflect objective truth, but have been discursively produced, particularly when one culture is defined as categorically different from another. It is the discursive construction of culture and pedagogies for teaching culture that this paper explores.

The paper also examines the authors' pedagogical approach to teaching New Zealand culture and society to adult students. We concur with Kubota (2004) that the teaching of culture requires a pedagogy that is informed by critical analysis. The process of teaching and learning needs to deconstruct aspects of culture and provide opportunities for individual learners to remember and reconstruct their own knowledge and experience of cultures they are familiar with and those they are learning about in New Zealand.

Two main areas of literature underpin our research: first, Kubota's work on the construction of culture and related teaching pedagogy (2001, 2004, Kubota & Lin 2006), and second an exploration of individual social identity and language as a place of identity construction (Norton 1995, 2000, 2008; Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000; Pavlenko, 2002).

Liberal and critical multiculturalism

For her analysis of *liberal multicultural* and *critical multicultural* frames Kubota (2004) draws on the educationalist Nieto's research on creating multicultural learning communities. Culture, according to Nieto, is — among other characteristics — dynamic, multifaceted, embedded in context, influenced by social, economic, and political factors, socially constructed and dialectical (Nieto 1999: 49). For Kubota, a *liberal multicultural* analysis tends to be superficial, focusing on aspects of culture such as artifacts, festivals or customs, which are

treated in decontextualised and trivialised ways, divorced from people's everyday lives and the political struggle to define cultural identity. She gives the example from the United States of a classroom exercise of learning about the Day of the Dead celebration, which is a yearly remembrance of ancestors, without drawing connections to the social and political contexts of Latino people in the present day United States. She argues that it is superficial to present one cultural tradition without clearly presenting the current stresses for Latino people related to earning power and access to language skills.

Kubota contrasts *liberal multiculturalism* with *critical multicultural* education which has a more critical, transformative or social constructionist approach. It recognizes that social and economic inequality exists and examines how it is produced and perpetrated in relation to power and privilege. Critical multiculturalism therefore presents culture as constantly shifting under the influence of political, economic and technological developments as well as domestic and international relations of power.

Social identity and language socialization

The second area of literature underpinning this study is about the complexity of the individual learner's social identities and further underlines the importance of social context in language acquisition. Norton Peirce (1995, 2000, 2008) has challenged perceptions of the individual learner as unitary and static. Drawing on a postmodern framework, she has argued that learners have complex social identities, which are often contradictory and change over time. For her "the role of language is constitutive of and constituted by a learner's social identity" (1995: 17). Pavlenko (2002) also applies a post-structuralist frame and views language as a site of identity construction. For her language *acquisition* becomes language *socialisation* and language learners are viewed as agents who have multiple, dynamic and fluid identities. This theory:

> allows us to examine how linguistic, social, cultural, gender and ethnic identities of L2 (Second Language) users, on the one hand structure access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities, and on the other are constituted and reconstituted in the process of L2 learning and use. (Pavlenko 2002: 283)

It allows researchers '....to examine how identity options afforded by the L2 influence learners' choices and learning trajectories' (286) within a definition of culture that allows for instability and flux. Culture, like the learner who negotiates and co-constructs it, is not fixed or static but dynamic.

A small scale study

With Kubota's challenge in mind, the key area of exploration for our study was the discursive construction of culture. Our two research questions were: How do learners engage with New Zealand society and culture? How do they describe their experience of New Zealand society and culture?

Data were gathered from a community placement assessment in a paper called Culture and New Zealand Society (CNZS) in year two of a three-year Bachelor's degree in English as an Additional Language (EAL), taught at a New Zealand polytechnic, and from two semesters of reflective journals written by learners while on

community placement. Written permission to use the journals was gained from all 28 students at the beginning of each semester in which the course ran. The students were all in their 20s or 30s. Their professional, educational, social and cultural backgrounds and living circumstances were varied, including refugees, migrants, international students, and study-abroad students who were on a semester exchange from an overseas university. Predominantly female and Chinese, they came from Mainland China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Somalia, Sweden, Germany, and Romania.

The journals, which consisted of 'thick descriptions' of their placement experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) were analysed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Attempts were made to triangulate data by obtaining feedback from placement supervisors and by recording group discussions about the placement experience.

An acknowledged limitation of the research is that for students there was pressure to achieve well in assessments and pass the CNZS paper, which may have led them to choose not to explore negative experiences in their journals. This possible self-censorship of reflective journals may also be attributable to the power of the teacher and of the school 'as a power-laden site'. As Canagarajah (2004: 120) has argued, students may be intimidated by their perception of the teacher's power leading them to: 'desist from presenting identities that are not institutionally desired'.

Course background

The CNZS course began by exploring post-European contact history through focusing on different waves of historical settlement, the development of institutions and current social structure. An overview of the Treaty of Waitangi and relationships between Treaty partners was an integral part of the course.

T here were also deconstructive analyses of Kiwi humour and images of Kiwiana, stories of New Zealand's multicultural writers and film makers, and discussion of the changes developing in New Zealand English (NZE).

Although the three course tutors were Pakeha of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic origin — they attempted to make space for a variety of experiences which reflect the various ethnicities that make up New Zealand society. These included Samoan and German New Zealand visitors to the group; a visit to a local marae hosted by local tangata whenua; and course readings offering a variety of social perspectives, including Witi Ihimaera and Tze Ming Mok. The showing of New Zealand films also provided an opportunity to explore historical and contemporary aspects of society The course aimed to give participants an opportunity to articulate and reflect on their own individual social and cultural identities and become more conscious of how these have shaped, and continue to shape their lives

For the requisite 10-hour community placement, students were encouraged to find placement for themselves, though tutors provided a letter of introduction, suggestions of places and ongoing support, including talking to potential supervisors. In 2007, we argued that:

> Community placements provide learners with a safe, supportive and 'Kiwi'
> [community of practice] for negotiating situated sociolinguistic and socio-cultural
> meanings via observing, recognising, practising and participating in New Zealand
> culture, its social practices, values, mores, customs, conventions, laws and principles
> (Andrew & Kearney, 2007).

Placements were found in a variety of settings in the voluntary, private, business education and local government sectors. We drew our justification for the value of community placements from Norton (2000), who argues for providing learners with roles other than those of 'student' or 'immigrant' by placing them in the community to interact, observe and record, as 'ethnographers' and 'researchers.' They are then able to bring their experiences and reflections back to the classroom to share with classmates and teachers. The community placement enables learners to engage different identities. The assessment for the community placement also employs the "Reflective Practice Method" (RPM), an approach which connects classroom content to meaningful application beyond it, bringing with it a sense of the autobiographical self's evolution via reflection (Birch and Kemp, 2000).

Pedagogy and the role of the teacher
The role of the course teachers was not cultural expert, but rather as facilitators who presented information and supported learners to use their own experience and develop their own understanding. Our pedagogical approach was underpinned by that proposed by Fennes and Hapgood (1997) and Dlaska (2000), which involves acquiring an understanding of one's own culture, its values, lifestyles and patterns of behaviour, as well as those of other cultures, becoming conscious of stereotypes and prejudices, and learning to accept and value cultural differences. Kubota (2004) warns that English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers need to take care not to present another culture as static or unchanging. She argues that teachers must go beyond a liberal multicultural frame and teach with an integrated critical multicultural analysis. We aimed to achieve this in our approach to working with course members.

Some illustrative examples

Learners had various personal investments in participating in the CNZS courses. For some it was the desire to understand more about the society they had chosen to live in. Others had chosen to study in New Zealand and saw the course as a route to enabling them to find work. Study-abroad students wanted to experience aspects of New Zealand society in the limited time available to them. All the students aimed to develop language skills.

The following examples drawn from the students' journals illustrate their varied experiences as they engaged with different aspects of New Zealand society and culture. A first, quick reading clearly showed that the nature of the placement (for example whether in an unfamiliar or familiar setting; or whether in a business or social care setting) influenced the learner's experience of and perspective on New Zealand society. This confirms Nieto's argument that culture is embedded in context; the 'context' in this study was both the specific placement, and the wider New Zealand society.

We present below five examples to illustrate learners' experiences of the discursive construction of culture and society: two are of learners who did their placement at their place of paid work; three are of learners who found placements as volunteers in familiar settings. These examples highlight culture as contextual, relational and multifaceted, as the literature discussed earlier suggests.

Ronald
Ronald, an international student from Romania, was based at a wholesale warehouse where he had been employed on a part-time basis for over a year, so he was experienced in all aspects of the work. He worked in a team of 65 employees from around the world and consequently reflects in his journal:
"Because of the multicultural nature of the team communication is not always smooth and many times there are misunderstandings' However, despite those communication difficulties he heard many popular Kiwi idioms, which he had studied in class, including 'Jafa', a less than complimentary acronym for people who live in Auckland. A workmate had heard the term 'Jafa' in the South Island and recounted to Ronald that this denoted a critical attitude to Aucklanders. Reflecting on this reference to regional identity in New Zealand, Ronald drew on an aspect of his own cultural identity and wrote, " The good thing is that compared to Romania, in New Zealand it doesn't show on the car license plate where you are from, so you just tell them you are from someplace else than Auckland:' This journal entry recalls for us Kubota's analysis of the discursive construction of culture in which cultural and social circumstances change depending upon participants and place.

In another journal entry, Ronald describes his experience of working in the warehouse thus: "Discriminating things happen quite often against all immigrants and outsiders... It cannot be seen by customers, or it is never 'in your face' but it happens and it's very subtle:' From what he describes as his 'outsider' position, he was aware of a subtle power dynamic between New Zealand-born employees and those newer to the country. He experienced this as negative. The experience of working in the warehouse, according to Ronald, varied according to immigration or visa status.

Sally
Sally was from Taiwan. Her paid work was in a catering company, as a member of a multicultural team. She illustrates, through what she writes in her journal, the discursive construction of culture, particularly workplace

culture, as she compares the experience of working in New Zealand, with working in Taiwan. She describes the differences between workplace cultures in the two countries, illustrating Nieto's belief that culture, in this situation workplace culture, is socially constructed and dependent, according to Sally's reflections, upon the country it operates in.

She reflects on her experience in New Zealand, writing: "no matter how easy job you've done, the manager always admires you...to encourage you" which she believes "is a good idea to increase the efficiency to the employer:' By contrast, in Taiwan the workplace atmosphere is 'high pressure and "the manager always thinks that doing the right thing is your duty" so "it means it is very hard to hear any admiration or encouragement from the manager or boss:' She reflects, "I found a lot of Taiwanese don't know how to release their pressure while they are working:' But her experience in New Zealand was different: "When we are busy to pack the catering, some workmate will open (turn on) the radio to release the pressure or the supervisor will say something funny to us to decrease our nervousness:'

Another experience she describes in detail is the shock she received when a Māori workmate remarked to her:

"Chinese is very smart if you compare with Māori people, right?" It was 'a kind of culture shock for me' she writes as she considers this experience of an unfamiliar approach to cultural difference. She records: "I was too surprised to give her an answer immediately . . .you can't say a bad thing in front of another group…It is just like what the old Chinese man said: 'domestic scandals should not be publicized or don't wash dirty linen in public'."

She then reflects at length on the cultural attitudes which might inform the different kinds of behaviour of people from Māori and Chinese societies, using her insight from her own culture. She argues that is not because Chinese are any 'smarter' than Māori that they can have more money in a short time. It is, she records, because in Chinese culture, the need 'to take protective measures in advance' is very important. Without a system of social welfare similar to that which is in place in New Zealand, Chinese 'has this kind of conscious[ness} of saving money: Her reflections show her insight into her own cultural identity and her ability to analyse what she considers to be cultural influences on individual behaviour. Sally's journal reflections on her workplace recall Nieto's analysis of culture as being multi-faceted and influenced by social and economic factors.

Bella
Bella, a Chinese international student, undertook her community placement as a volunteer in a retirement home. Her experience led her to reflect at length on issues of ageing. She compares her own experience of elderly people in China, with this new experience of ageing in New Zealand: "Many Chinese older people like to live with their children…However, it's common in New Zealand that elderly stay at the rest home:' She reflects on changes to the family structure

taking place in China writing: "more and more young adults are moving out, leaving their elderly parents alone' Bella analyses the contrast between elderly people living in the two countries, thus illustrating the discursive construction of culture. In her experience and written reflection on the change happening in Chinese culture she illustrates Kubota's analysis of culture as changing over time under the influence of political and economic developments.

Bella's interaction with the elderly clientele of the rest home gave her an insight into New Zealand's social history, most clearly through her experience of working on Anzac Day. She saw older people wearing red poppies, while she served Anzac biscuits with coffee. She wrote "A lot of elderly people fairly enjoyed a traditional Anzac biscuit and enjoyed the pleasure of reminiscence as well. Stories and laughter filled the coffee inn' Her experience of this aspect of New Zealand's culture related through the wartime memories of elders, again recalls Kubota's analysis of culture changing as it is constantly influenced by domestic and international relations.

Katie

Katie, a study-abroad student from Sweden, did her placement at a Red Cross Shop. She appreciated her supervisor, Lisa, a Māori woman, giving her the chance to talk to 'a real' New Zealander.' Katie reflects: 'I'm glad that I learned a bit about Māori culture in class, because then I understand more when Lisa talks about her life and her background.' Katie acknowledged 'Lisa tries so hard to teach us about New Zealand culture.' She describes how Lisa brought different kinds of Kiwifruit for lunch so Katie could taste them. "She said that we needed to taste them because it was New Zealand culture, although... Kiwi fruit originally comes from China." She also found three books for them, one about Whina 'the famous Maori woman', one about Māori culture and one about New Zealand landscapes, and gave her two Kiwi toys. "She said it was all culture we need to know"

In the shop where she talked to: "all kinds of nationalities, for example Chinese, Indian, English, Pakeha, Māori, Samoan and Korean," she found people quick to talk to her about their own travels. "Every time people hear that I am from Sweden they shine up and start to talk about their experiences and what they know of the world. Almost like they want to prove that they are travelled... .Can it be that New Zealand is a small island and Kiwis don't want to feel left out?"

In her journal Katie describes the discussions she had with people in the shop. These included discussions about Kiwi English. She records that Lisa said

'American English is sneaking into the Kiwi English and it's a shame' She then compares this with her own experience, "I can really see that, because even in my Swedish language we use more and more English words:' She also wrote that she was happy to have learned some Kiwi slang in class otherwise she would have had difficulty understanding the man who came into the shop saying he was "just back from 'the wopwops' and *now* he was looking for some 'gummies' because it was about to rain:'

Another aspect of New Zealand culture she discussed in the shop was the widespread use of drugs. She records her shock at the acceptance of their use and people's surprise when she told them she did not use drugs. Katie's reflections illustrate Nieto's description that culture is multi-faceted and embedded in context. Taking drugs seems to be more socially acceptable in New Zealand in a way which it is not in the social context from which Katie comes.

Hannah

Hannah, a third year international Chinese student, records that doing her placement at the City Mission: "I started to realize how shallow I know about New Zealand and the people here:' She describes her placement as "this unforgettable life experience:' During the three days as a volunteer there she helped serve coffee, chatted with people as they came in to watch television and went out to another suburb to pick up donations of household goods for the City Mission's second hand shop. She worked with Indian, Korean, Pakeha and Māori people and remarked: "it's very interesting to listen to their. . -conversation with typical different ways of expressing.'

She wrote that on the walls were some rules for the City Mission "such as no insulting words and no shouting:' These rules helped to describe how the particular culture of this place is developed. She continues "In the city mission people don't judge people, no matter they are homeless or drug addicts because after all they are just like everyone else who wants to have a better life... .They created a special culture which belongs to those people:' She wrote that her placement made her realise that culture is about people and that culture is everywhere:' Her investment of time and her willingness to step outside her usual circles heightened her awareness of others' situations and backgrounds. Her journal entries illustrate Chuang argument that identity is shaped by organisational context and also Nieto's description of culture as socially constructed and influenced by social and economic factors.

Conclusions

Kubota's assertion that culture and cultural identity are continuously discursively constructed is valuable to EAL teachers in the rapidly changing society of Aotearoa New Zealand. The learners' journal reflections

highlighted in this paper illustrate that their experience of New Zealand society and culture was contextual, relational and multifaceted as Fong and Chuang describe. Together, our reading of the literature and our small scale exploration of our students' experiences on their community placements, have heightened our awareness of the multiple and sometimes conflicting identities and perceptions of students. This in turn has helped us to gain greater clarity of purpose in our work with students as they negotiate and engage with new cultures.

Throughout the process of teaching, researching and writing we have been reminded, as Hansen and Liu (1997) suggest, of our need to be conscious of our own histories, and cultural and social identities, and how they impact on our professional roles.

Despite its limitations, this small-scale study has provided some useful insight to inform our course and assessment design. First, it is important to construct the placement assessment to be flexible and to encompass a range of experiences and contexts. It is also necessary to provide questions that focus learners on aspects of culture, society and language, and engage them in active reflection in their journals and in discussion. To facilitate this reflection we have found it useful to encourage students to bring their placement experiences back into the classroom as material to stimulate discussion and writing.

A course like CNZS, which is linked to a community placement, enables students to move from a classroom situation, taking the cultural and social knowledge they may have gained there, to a supported community context. The community placement may allow them to develop a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of New Zealand society, and to build relationships as well as facilitating language development.

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