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‘Research makes me strong’ : An Oriental perspective towards using an autoethnographic approach

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‘Research makes me strong’: An Oriental perspective towards using an autoethnographic approach

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Abstract

Having received critical comments from academic journal reviewers, the Author reflects on herself and her practices, which led to her thinking back to the start of her career as an Action Researcher and exploring ways to study herself and hence what it means to write an autoethnography. The exploration included a relevant literature review, which suggested to her that its writing process may inevitably lead authors to be engaged in the negotiation of their own identity, and an interview with a former colleague who has attempted to use autoethnography in her Action Research (AR) practice. The Author claims writing an autoethnography could help us negotiate our own identities through shuttling between them and through a dialogic relationship with ourselves, which is why it may be worth incorporating autoethnography into an AR practice. Most notably, the colleague’s word, which is that research made her strong, may mean everything to the Author.

Key words: Autoethnography, Action Research, language ideologies, identity negotiation

What is known about the topic?

Autoethnography can be used as a method in reflective practice.

What does this paper add?

This paper adds the possibility of incorporating autoethnography into an AR practice and its significance.

Who will benefit from its content?

Any of those who are engaged with reflective practice as well as those who practise Action Research.

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

The researcher is part of the research.

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Prologue

I want to be able to imagine what was done and how so that I can, if I wanted to, conduct a similar study ... I noticed that the author uses 'I' quite often. If this was a collaboration, which the word 'group' implies, I wonder if we can hear any other voices in this report? (Reviewer, personal communication, March 13, 2019)

There is an emphasis on what happened and how it happened during the AR [action research] process but hardly anything on the 'why'. As such, the narrative is superficial ... AR is at its most powerful when conflicts and non-mutual understandings are brought to the surface, debated and resolved ... The point is that this is where learning and change occur and should not be glossed over or wished away. Was this to do with cultural inhibition on the part of the students or through the effect of unequal power relations between teacher and students? (Reviewer, personal communication, May 26, 2020)

These are extracted from the reviewers' comments on two pieces of my writing which I previously submitted to two different academic journals. The first was taken from a review on a paper of mine which I had submitted to the proceedings of an international conference on language teaching held in Japan in 2018. In the

paper I explained the process by which some Japanese English language teachers, including myself, developed our understanding of communicative competence. I understand communicative competence, which is one of the topics raised in my PhD study conducted between 2014-2018, as being 'how we can effectively communicate with others so as to reach mutual understanding' (Kondo, 2018).

The second extract was from a comment on my paper submitted to the *Action Learning and Action Research Journal* based on my presentation at the CARN-ALARA Conference in Croatia in 2019. Having started my new professional career at a university in Japan after working at junior high schools for years, I attempted to explain in the paper how my students and I developed our communicative competence as I saw it, through working together. Both comments indicate the papers were superficial, although only the second one uses the word 'superficial', and questions if I actually collaborated with other people and if there were no conflicts among those involved due to 'unequal power relations'. This can be read to mean that the paper led the reviewer to speculate even cultural differences between myself (a Japanese and non-native English user) and themselves (possibly a native English speaker with a Western background) as a possible reason why conflicts and non-mutual understandings were not brought to the surface. I do not think such strong cultural inhibition exists in our society as well as on the part of students. Although I felt confused when seeing the phrase 'cultural inhibition' in the comment, I wrote the paper that led the reviewer to come up with its possibility. The reviewers' comments above reminded me of something that my first supervisor often told me, when I was doing my PhD study, to 'write at an explanatory level, which means giving reasons and purposes for [my] actions' in order that readers don't have to work things out for themselves (J. McNiff, personal communication, August 10, 2014). McNiff (2013) explains what it means to 'write for a reader' and 'write like a reader' as follows:

Develop the capacity of writing for a reader ... The only thing they know about you is what they read on the page ... To write like a reader, practise putting yourself in your reader's shoes and reading your own work with a critical eye, or perhaps ask someone who is unfamiliar with your work to read it for you, or even to you (McNiff, 2013, p. 152).

The reviewers' comments above clearly showed me that I had not learned from my own experience, which must be taken seriously if I call myself a researcher.

I would like to make clear that it is not my intention to make excuses for my clumsy pieces of writing nor to argue against those reviewers in this paper. However, they did motivate me to consider the future course of my practice as a teacher and a researcher. It was while I was considering this that I came across two things that got me thinking.

The first was an article published in the *Educational Action Research Journal* (Pinner, 2018) in which the author attempted to 'gain a better understanding of [his] own experience which [he] had already begun to mythologise through [his] own narrative research in other articles' (p. 94). The author uses the term 'mythologising' as follows:

to describe a potentially negative process of moving away from a verifiable or "valid" account of the course through retellings which were not part of evidence-based reflection, as oppose to the "re-storying" process advocated in quality narrative research (Pinner, 2018, p. 92).

In this attempt, the author conducted 'a kind of "archaeological excavation" of the perceived reality' of his best course he has ever taught since he was afraid that '[his] perception of its success was based on untested assumptions' (pp. 91-95). Autoethnography was used as a method, which he concludes helped him 'take stock of a formative professional experience before it becomes obscured by the process of mythologising it' and therefore helps us 'develop as reflective professionals' (Pinner 2018, p. 103). I got interested in this article partly because I also have a class which I like to think is

the best I have ever taught and for which I won the University Professor of the Year 2019 in recognition of being highly rated in an institutional course evaluation survey by my students. Although this class award was different from the one I picked up for my presentation at the CARN-ALARA Conference in 2019, Pinner's (2018) autoethnographic study led me to wonder if my success in a certain class might have obscured what I had to reconsider about my practices and thus prevented me learning from them. The study also resulted in my learning that I could try to use an autoethnographic approach and similarly embark on an archaeological excavation of the perceived reality of my practices as the next step.

The second thing that got me thinking was the webpage of a Japanese researcher in the same field as me - English language education and applied linguistics. The researcher wrote that he did not recognise the meaning in separating teaching from doing research, since he was researching himself as a teacher and his students he was teaching. Unfortunately, I could not find the source or the name of the researcher, which I much regret. What was written on the webpage reminded me of my presentation at the Postgraduate Research Methodologies Conference in 2014 in the early days of my PhD study. The last presentation slide says, 'I am studying MYSELF in company with other people, exploring who I am as a teacher and a teacher educator' (Kondo, 2014). This was inspired by a conversation with my first supervisor who had suddenly asked me, 'Who are you studying?' I got confused by the unexpected question and gave her several answers, such as research participants, education policy, and teacher education methodology, but she gave a nod to none of these. I then had an idea and suggested, 'Myself?' She smiled. This was a crucial conversation which has remained embedded in my memory. Nevertheless, I was not able to find its date or any notes about it in my journal notebook, which must also be taken seriously. I should record such experiences to get back to for re-evaluation. I realised this through Pinner (2018), explaining we can still investigate an experience 'despite the length of time that has passed since it took place' (p. 103). He recalls that he has 'always engaged in a process

of collecting classroom data with the intention of somehow turning it into a publishable piece of research' (p. 103), which has led to his keeping a massive amount of information. He recognises no "sell by date" or "publish-by-date" for data (p. 103). This led me to reflect on my practice and reconsider whether I might have tried to rush presenting and publishing my work without enough careful examination of the data and believed that 'there is a certain "sell-by-date" to data collected as part of classroom research' (Pinner, 2018, p. 103). I am wondering if this attitude of mine, this not 'conducting a kind of "archaeological excavation" of the perceived reality' (Pinner, 2018, p. 95), might have led to the reviewers' comments above.

Having said that, I have always reflected and re-reflected on my practices, which has informed my further practices, although it is difficult for me to show the evidence since I have found it hard to keep a reflective journal in my busy daily life (which I do recognise is the point that has to be reconsidered). Now I ask myself the same question which my first supervisor asked me: who am I studying? These days I can answer without hesitation: 'Myself'. I have returned to the same place after several years, and now I feel much better in answering like this. Because I have arrived here by myself this time, I feel I can see the future direction of my research practice.

Around the same time, I came up with the idea of interviewing a former colleague of mine from the time when I was doing my PhD study, who has written up her dissertation about her attempt to use autoethnography in an AR project. Her considerable efforts and her tenacity in research have always inspired me and aroused my interest and led me to do a literature review on autoethnography (see the next section) before interviewing her.

I hope I have been able to clearly explain so far how the above-mentioned reviewers' comments have motivated me to consider the future course of my practice as a teacher and a researcher. This paper is the story of my exploration of autoethnography and of what it means to write using an autoethnographic approach in an AR practice. In order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality,

the name of the colleague, who readily consented to me interviewing her and including what I learnt from the interview in a paper, is a pseudonym (Ling).

Autoethnography

In this section, I overview how autoethnography is explained in the relevant literature. As a former secondary school English language teacher and currently a university lecturer in English language education and applied linguistics, as well as being engaged with pre/in-service teacher education, I mainly review works written by academics in the same field. First, Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (p. 739). Loo (2017) categorizes the genre and explains two kinds of autoethnography, ‘analytic’ and ‘evocative’, as follows. Due to the characteristics of evocative autoethnography, which includes aiming to ‘deliver a narrative accessible to a larger and more varied audience’ (p. 46), not only for scholars or academics, it is ‘too personal, hence less trustworthy and unscientific’ (p. 45). It depends ‘heavily on personal subjectivity’ and can be challenged on ‘its immediate worth in light of established knowledge’ (p. 49). On the other hand, analytic autoethnography ‘aims to maintain the rigor of traditional social science research’, and its stories are investigated ‘in light of professional communities and theoretical frameworks’ (p. 45). After attempts to use these two approaches, Loo (2017) favours analytic autoethnography, in that it ‘supports a dialogic relationship between personal experiences with broader theoretical constructs’, ‘positions teachers as critical and systematic thinkers’, and ‘may be more successful in ensuring the confidentiality of participants being examined’ (p. 57). Loo (2017) led me to look at Canagarajah (2012). I have often referred to Canagarajah in my previous writing. My sympathy with Canagarajah’s works may come from the fact that I have been a non-native English language teacher in Japan, although Japan differs from Sri Lanka, where Canagarajah came from, in that English is taught as a foreign language in Japan but is used widely

and officially in Sri Lanka. Canagarajah first gives an etymological explanation of autoethnography: “*auto*’ as ‘the point of view of the self’, *ethno*’ as our ‘socially constructed’ experiences and development, and *graphy*’ as narratives ‘the creative resources of writing’ (Canagarajah, 2012, p. 260, emphasis in original). As ‘a periphery professional in TESOL’ (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) in the US (p. 262), Canagarajah admits to ‘tensions in the diverse identities one enjoys that may never be resolved’, which however ‘can lead to forms of negotiation that generate critical insights and in-between identities’ (p. 261); this discussion is also noticed by Loo (2017). In this context, Jones (2005) encourages us to ‘*recognize the power of the in-between*’ and to insist on ‘the interaction of message and aesthetics, process and product, the individual and the social’ (p. 784, emphasis in original). Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain when writers ‘*zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition*’ (p. 739, emphasis in original). Canagarajah (2012) also claims ‘a resistant dimension to autoethnography’ in that ‘storytelling is not politically innocent’ (p. 261). Overall, Canagarajah views autoethnography as

a valuable form of knowledge construction in our field, as TESOL professionals in diverse communities can use this genre to represent their professional experiences and knowledge in a relatively less threatening academic manner (p. 262).

Similarly, Yazan (2019), who is originally from Turkey and has contended with the idea of “‘nativeness’ that has been part of the dominant language ideologies’ (p. 42) in our field, uses ‘language ideologies as a conceptual lens in [his] narrative to interrupt [his] experiences negotiating identities as a language user, teacher, and teacher educator’ (p. 34). Valuing the process of writing autoethnography, Yazan (2019) describes how writing the autoethnography and his ‘identity negotiation’ as teacher educator are never finished (p. 51). It may be noted that both Loo (2017) and Yazan (2019) refer to the difficulty of selecting stories or narratives as a challenge in autoethnography writing. On this point, Loo

(2017) is concerned about being recognised as ‘cherry picking’ (p. 57). Yazan explains that it was difficult partly because of contemplating which identity to act out through the narrative (2019, p. 51). Finally, Wall (2008), a study outside the TESOL field, in an autoethnography about international adoption, mentions “‘objectivity”, data quality, legitimacy and ethics’ as challenges in autoethnography writing (p. 39), and takes up the following intriguing points. The attempt to ‘avoid emotion and defensiveness’ to gain objectivity led to her undermining the aims of her autoethnography writing (p.44). Wall (2008) further recalls:

In an effort to help me defend my work, my supervisory committee asked me to justify my strategy of using memories as data. It seems that unless data about personal experience are collected and somehow transformed by another researcher, they fail to qualify as legitimate (p. 45).

I felt a sense of closeness to the author, maybe because I thought this might explain the difficulty that Action Researchers may feel in their practices. Wall’s practices to ‘assess the quality and potential contribution of [her] narrative’ (2008, p. 46) include seeking feedback from her academic mentor and thinking about her writing in the light of the questions offered by Ellis (2000), which Ellis asks herself when ‘evaluating narrative ethnographies’ (p. 273). Jones (2005) also asks us to ‘consider how our autoethnographic texts do not stand, speak, or act alone; are not texts alone; and do not want to be left alone’ (p. 783). This gave me a useful idea on how to review my writing before submitting it to someone, which I will practise later in this paper.

These accounts have explained to me how, through writing autoethnography, one could create a dialogic relationship between the personal and the cultural and connect them through multiple layers of consciousness. Through its process, one may be inevitably engaged in the negotiation of his/her own identity, which might cause some degree of tension, since storytelling is not politically innocent, as Canagarajah (2012) explains. It may sound reasonable since ‘languages are in such close existence to us’ and hence ‘language itself can be easily linked with ideology’ (Torikai et al.,

2017, p. 103, author's translation). On reflection, as a non-native English language teacher and a former international student in a Western country, I may have always been engaged in identity negotiation within myself as well as meaning negotiation in the setting of communication. Canagarajah (2014) explains the attitude of being open to negotiation as one's 'language awareness' and which is part of one's communicative competence (p. 91). Navigating through the tensions, which may arise through the negotiation, could enable us to enhance our sensitivity to language, our identities and the world around us. How to theorize the writing of autoethnography also suggests to me a possible idea of combining autoethnography into the AR methodology. This sounds meaningful, considering the purpose of AR is '(1) to generate new knowledge, which (2) feeds into new theory' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011, p. 14). In the next section, I will explain my exploration of autoethnography, reflecting on the interview with Ling.

What it means to write an autoethnography in an Action Research practice

In this section, I will reflect on the interview with Ling and what I learned from it. As mentioned above, Ling is a former colleague of mine from when I was doing my PhD study in the UK. She started her PhD study when I was in my third year. Because we had so much in common - being English teaching professionals, coming from Asia, studying AR, working with supervisors from the UK and going back and forth between a home country and the UK - we often talked with each other about not only our research stories but also daily life issues as international students living abroad. Having stayed in touch after I left the UK, I occasionally had the chance to hear from her about how she was managing to complete her PhD while going through so much. The pandemic occurred right about that time, which made her life even more difficult. Although her story sometimes broke my heart, each time I could not help feeling admiration for her tenacity, strength and intelligence. I conducted a semi-structured style of interview with

her which was recorded for later analysis via Zoom in December 2021. Table 1 shows the course of events as to how she came to use autoethnography in her AR project:

Table 1. *The course of events as to how Ling came to use autoethnography in her action research project*

How she learned about action research	Became a research participant in an AR project done by American colleagues at her home university. She then paid an academic visit to a UK university to explore how to do AR, which led to her deciding to do her PhD study at another UK university
The purpose of her PhD research	To help her colleagues at her home university learn AR through working together in her AR project, including three cycles of action research; action research tended to be seen just as a report, not a theory or a methodology, to summarize somebody else's experiences and to make teaching more effective at her home university
The first AR cycle	Went well in that she found AR was useful and that research participants showed their interest in it as a methodology, which was something new to them
The second AR cycle	Realized difficulties in achieving the purpose of her research, such as geographical difficulty, time difference and the research participants' difficulties in making time for her research because of their teaching commitments and family responsibilities, and hence resulted in collecting an insufficient amount of data
The third AR cycle	In order to make her AR project available, decided to use an autoethnography, in which her main supervisor was well versed, and hence the third cycle became her personal account

During the interview, Ling mentioned a crucial supervision meeting where she tried to analyse the reason why her original intention had failed. She then found that she regarded herself as a teacher or a learner rather than a researcher during the first two AR cycles and decided that she was going to look at the issue by positioning herself as a researcher. This reflects Oyama's (2017) discussion that autoethnography can 'make possible back-and-forth practice where someone becomes aware of his/her positionality and views themselves from the newly realised position' (p. 81, author's translation). Ling further explains that she decided to make a reflective account in the third AR cycle:

to analyse how I change in my ideas about myself, how I change my perceptions about research, and how I'm going to continue to work as a researcher. (Ling, personal communication, December 29, 2021)

Referring to her personal unhappiness, including an unhappy marriage, she continues:

part of the reason [why I was determined to continue to do the research] was that I wanted to explain to my readers that I didn't give it up ... my wisdom comes from my personal experiences ... my professional life is connected with my personal life, and I think my professional identity is there and my cultural identities are also there. So in order to analyse my cultural identities, I want to talk about how I've lived my life ... that's why I use autoethnography ... the final conclusion is that by connecting the research with my personal life, I find that I'm in fact trying to find out the meaning of life. I think what made me become so strong and what makes me quite so persevering and so resilient ... was because I realised that it was meaningful for me. (Ling, personal communication, December 29, 2021)

She then clearly said that she had changed - her view about research and the meaning of her own life had changed and it had made a difference. I found myself saying, 'Your thesis is beautiful, it sounds very beautiful!'. Thus, she simply answered my question, as written in the prologue, as to what it means to write an autoethnography in an AR practice.

As explained, in the third AR cycle Ling used autoethnography as a research methodology in order to study herself, and also used it as a method to talk about her personal life and how she was encouraged to continue to develop her professional career. She further stressed that it was the same as AR in that it is not only a method but also a theory. It may be worth incorporating autoethnography into an AR practice since it could help us negotiate our own identities through shuttling between them and through a dialogic relationship with oneself. We could say it can therefore contribute to researchers' growth. At any rate, what she said to me about research making her strong, may prove to mean everything to me.

Epilogue

As I mentioned above, I will review this piece of writing by answering some questions posed by Ellis (2000, p. 275).

'Is there anything "new" here or a new way to view or twist the familiar?'

The idea itself of using autoethnography as a method and a theoretical framework in an AR practice was new to me, and it has motivated me to (co)-construct an idea of the AR methodology combined with an autoethnographic approach. Writing this piece has also made me aware of the similarities between practising action research and writing an autoethnography, which I have never thought about.

'[D]oes the story ring true, is it lifelike?'

I hope I was able to 'represent the chaos' (p. 275) within myself through referring to the reviewers' comments in the opening of the Prologue and my response to them, and provide 'a readable and understandable experience' (p. 275) in terms of the issue of what/who I am studying. I also appreciate the real-life conversation with my colleague, in which I see 'individual and collective meaning-making processes' (Kondo, 2018) and feel very happy about being engaged in the process.

‘Did the author know the end of the story when she started or does writing become a form of inquiry?’

I hope I was able to ‘show, instead of tell’ (p. 275) the events that led up to my exploring the meaning of autoethnography and what it means to write an autoethnography in an AR practice while reviewing relevant literature and real-life spoken data. Furthermore, writing this piece of paper has helped me view myself as a researcher. Now I feel I have reached the starting line of exploring AR as a researcher.

‘What might readers take from the story? Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds? Is it useful, and if so, for whom?’

In my PhD thesis (Kondo, 2018), as an interdisciplinary study, I explain the powerful combination of AR as methodology and critical applied linguistics as discipline, as follows:

Applied linguists may clearly benefit from adopting self-reflective practices ... through reflection on themselves as well as the people that they are researching, they might develop sensitivity about how they were exercising their influence on the dialogue, such as when negotiating with stakeholders. Conversely, using an applied linguistic approach might help action researchers develop sensitivity to the dialogic context which they are inevitably influencing. (Kondo, 2018)

Similarly, I would like to say that the story in this paper could make Action Researchers more conscious of their identities as language users, of how they negotiate their identities, how we are influencing each other in actual dialogic contexts, and the fact that we all take responsibility for those dialogic contexts. Becoming aware of these could make a difference in practising AR. I would say all Action Researchers could benefit from writing an autoethnography.

Overall, I look forward to further exploration, which I hope could lead to my growth as a researcher.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to my good and respectable friend (Ling), as a person, a teacher and an Action Researcher, who has always inspired me and made me feel admiration for her intelligence, sincerity and tenacity. It has been an honour to meet her and work with and learn from her. I am so grateful to her for giving me this very productive and fruitful time to explore the wonderful method and methodology.

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Biography



Tamiko Kondo, from Japan, has international experience which includes teaching in Belgium and completing her PhD study in the UK, and is currently a lecturer in English language education and applied linguistics at University of the Ryukyus, Japan. She has been practising Action Research since her master's study as a teacher educator. In her recent project, she has been working with local school teachers towards a smooth transition from primary to junior high school English class.