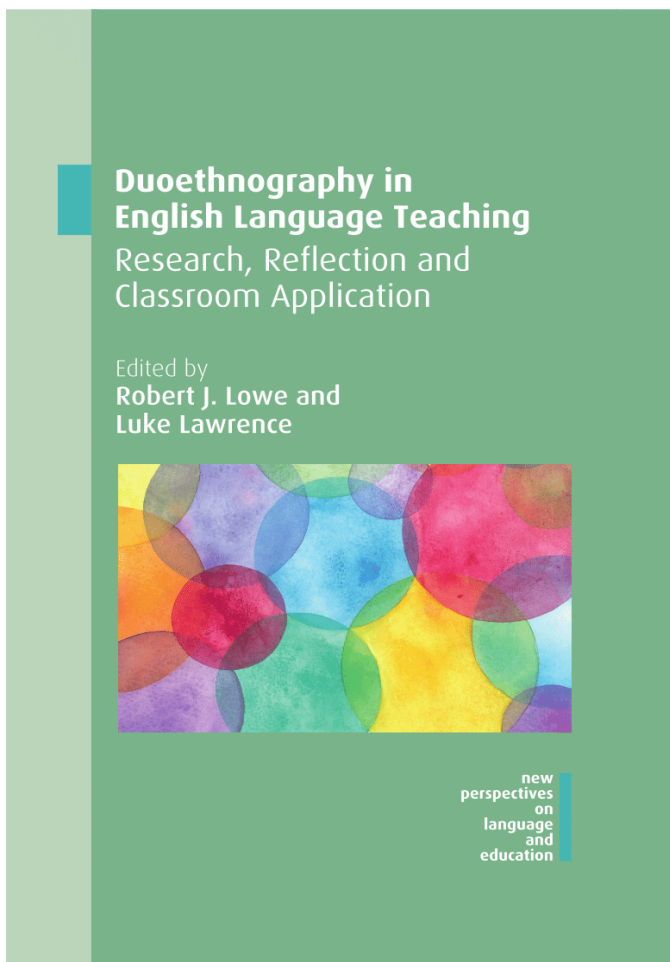


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Book Review: *Duoethnography in English Language Teaching: Research, Reflection and Classroom Application.*

Edited by Lowe, R.J. & Lawrence, L. (2020). *Multilingual Matters.*



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Narrative understandings were what first pulled me into the Learner Development SIG. The possibility of being able to contribute to a community of teachers who were also conscious of being learners, gave me hope and inspiration for my own teaching and also enabled me broaden my repertoire by learning from others. The first issue of *Learning Learning* which I ever read featured a piece by Murphy and Chang (2001) entitled “Coco capuccino company and legitimate peripheralizing: learning through autoethnographizing ourselves.” The use of the genre of “written dialogue” showed that one could write about teaching in a way that was lively and full of the juice of lived experience. Murphy was experimenting with scene setting to give a piece a pleasant affect and kinesthetic impact, which is probably why I remember it in contrast to 100s of other articles. The dialogue style allowed for two points of view to be explored without

foreclosing on one “right” idea. Writing a dialogue, one could give two sides of the question, and the probing from the dialogue partner often created insights which would not have been had when writing alone. Once I started dialoguing, I found it was more motivating than other forms of writing, since it was driven by the wish to reply to my co-writer. Were these collegial conversations “duoethnography”? It was not a word I had heard before. Ethnography was a room in a museum which was full of masks and old pots. In my mind those written dialogues were just collegial conversations.

The appearance of a book which puts forward a case for duoethnography to be taken seriously as a genre of academic writing, is a cause for celebration. As I read the first chapter of Lowe and Lawrence’s new book, I was excited to read this quote from Freire:

Some may think that to affirm dialogue – the encounter of men and women in the world in order to transform the world – is naively and subjectively idealistic. There is nothing more real and concrete than people in the world and with the world, than humans with other humans. (Freire, 1970: 102, In Lowe and Lawrence, p. 1).

In a world in which the hegemony of human knowledge and skill is rapidly being challenged by AI, this is a helpful reminder that our human experience is something we should value. Lowe and Lawrence's clear explanation of duo-ethnography will help any reader who wants to understand how their collegial conversations could be used as an academic genre. According to the introductory chapter, the first instance of published work using the term "duoethnography" was Norris and Sawyer's 2004 chapter on the hidden curriculum in relation to gender identity. Norris and Sawyer define duoethnography as "a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world." (Norris and Sawyer, 2012, in Lowe and Lawrence, p. 8).

The book consists of three sections. The first section "Duoethnography for ELT Research", which is said to be more theoretical and formal, features three papers emerging from encounters between demographically different "others" across gender and nationality. The issues include native speakerism, teacher autonomy in teaching critical issues, and tensions between the personal and the professional in a graduate student/supervisor relationship. The middle section "Duoethnography for Reflection and Teacher Education" consists of more freeform conversations by colleagues, including a dialogue between an experienced and novice teacher, two colleagues talking about a neurodiverse student, and a pair who write about their experience as teacher trainers at a university in Japan. The third section, "Duoethnography For Language Teaching", contains chapters describing the principles and implementation of duo-ethnography as a task for students. Both the authors offer accounts of modules in which students produced written duoethnographies. In Lowe's classroom, students researched a concept such as world Englishes or native speakerism, and wrote discussion question for a partner, alternating face-to-face discussion with exchanges of written questions and answers to their partner over a four week period, before performing the resulting questions and answers as a dialogue in front of other students. In Lawrence's class students recorded their discussions, then transcribed and created a written paper using their dialogue as data. One of the resulting papers is included (p. 170). There is a chapter by both authors together, (Chapter 8, p. 155 *Digging Deeper*) which offers a "how-to guide" together with student feedback from Lawrence's class (Chapter 10) and evidence of language related discussions during Lowe's class (Chapter 9), suggesting that these activities were perceived as helpful and interesting, though challenging for students.

Although the authors say that the first section puts more weight on theory, when reading, I could not see a huge difference between the blend of theory and practice in the first and middle sections, other than the first part written by Lowe and Lawrence, which contains the discursive groundwork positioning duo-ethnography as a genre of academic writing. This does not constitute a problem, since the theory is adequately explained and exemplified. However, the quality of my engagement with the book varied a bit due to lack of diversity in the perspectives in one or two papers in the middle section. One of the principles of duo-ethnography is that the participants should offer different perspectives on the issue in question. It is noticeable that the most successful papers are those in which the two authors are different in nationality and gender. In some of the other papers the authors' experience has been so similar that they seem to understand each other almost too well:

Of course, who you are is how you teach. That's indisputable. But at the same time, you're being a version of who you are. And I think that's true of how you are as a manager. It's a version of who I am but it's not necessarily the entirety of who I am.
(p. 147)

It would be fascinating to know more about the idea of "being a version of who you are" and whether these two educators ever experienced tensions between the "version" and "the entirety".

However the co-author simply comments “That’s really interesting and kind of brings me to my next point.”

It seems that there is a risk in duoethnography that participants understand each other too well. One wonders what would happen if one of the writers engaged in a dialogue with one of the teachers they manage. In contrast, another paper (Nagashima and Hunter, Chapter 3) describes teaching social issues from the point of view of a female Japanese teacher and a male UK teacher. Their different perspectives enable the reader to understand more about the privilege that “native speaker” teachers experience. The former was given the freedom to decide on his own curriculum for global issues teaching with the result that he was able to introduce critical issues discussions into his class and gained some satisfaction from being able to do this. On the other hand, the teacher who was from Japan was forced to teach grammar although she wanted to teach about feminism and racism. She reflected wistfully that maybe she should not be putting forward a critical perspective, precisely because it is aligned with her personal view and desire for social change and so in this sense she wonders if she is “biased”. A second important moment in the paper was when she wrote that she wishes those who already are in a powerful position would advocate for those who are not. The personal writing style can arguably capture things which academic prose cannot. For example regarding workplace sexism:

....most people may think it is a problem but they don’t really do anything. They remain quiet or they kind of like laugh it off. And they will never call them out....And the more I encounter those kinds of situations, the more I start to feel like those who are not on the immediate receiving end of problematic actions or behavior, maybe those who are closer to the perpetrator, should be able to speak up to them... (p. 63)

This spoke deeply to me, as did the sense of tentativeness which both participants felt about teaching critical social issues in a way that is not threatening to students.

Another chapter of great interest was that focusing on students with special educational needs (Kasperek and Turner, Chapter 6 *Puzzling about Special Needs in EFL Teacher Development*). The authors focus on a student who did not speak but communicated in writing. They were tasked by the administration with adapting a speaking class for the student, which they approached as a collaborative research venture, replacing spoken with written tasks and tempting her with references to her favorite anime and chocolate. They raise the issue that communicating a student’s diagnosis runs a risk of medicalizing what might previously be considered a personal character trait. In this chapter too, one felt the similarity between participants meant that they tended to speculate rather than engage with lived experience.

My feelings have led me to feel that working with a SEN learner presents professional puzzles, leading teachers to reevaluate practice once again, prompting teachers to find innovative ways to deliver lessons, while looking to ensure inclusivity and quality. (p. 129)

Clearly, the authors are caring people, and to their credit they do end up suggesting that they could try to “involve the students in action research projects” if they encounter such students in the future. However there was no mention of the Japanese legislation around special needs education, which has been developing steadily since 2000 (MEXT, 2012; UNESCO, 2014) and was probably the trigger for the importance given to the special needs students by their school administrators. It would have been useful if they could have contextualized the situation in relation to the required provisions within the university. It would also have been interesting to get a bit closer to the experience of the student whom they taught. Their paper concludes with a note that it covers the period up to 2018. Thus they hint that there have been subsequent developments in the understanding of neuro-diversity within the ELT community in Japan. Any discussion of

the awareness of educational special needs in Japan requires a mention of Alex Burke, whose award-winning poster presentation in 2019 helped to focus on the experience of students who are neuro-diverse (Burke, 2020).

What about the challenge that the writing style of duoethnography is overly self-referential? Breault (2015) suggests that some duoethnographic conversations are transformative, while some are static, consisting of “parallel talk” or “theory confirmation”. The emergence of this publication from a group of friends gives it a certain unity and positive energy and excitement but the friendships between co-authors may result in some pieces in which they simply reinforce each others’ views. At the same time, the fact that the style is chatty makes the book approachable to read. After a busy day at school, I am more inclined to dip into a text which reads “Tom said to Joe” than “Farrell (2016) comments as follows on Campbell (2014)”. I enjoyed the down-to-earth, readable style, the efforts at honest reflection and the feeling that reflection is inherently worth sharing. In addition, the theoretical sections of the book open the way for other conversations, other articles and other books. “Duoethnography in English Language Education” will be empowering and stimulating, particularly for those who want to find ways to articulate reflective practice and who gain motivation by co-constructing text with colleagues. What is more, the models of doing duoethnography as an activity with students offer exciting possibilities.

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