

## **Cultures in the Classroom:**

### **Teaching Anthropology as a 'Foreigner' in the UK**

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#### **The Classroom as Field**

Corsin-Jimenez (2003) provides us with the image of 'teaching the field'. I take up the related notion of 'the classroom as field', namely, looking through an anthropological lens at teaching anthropology as a non-British national in UK universities. I discuss some of the limitations and possibilities arising from this situation, and their impact on teaching and learning processes. I suggest that viewing the classroom as a field-site highlights parallels between the anthropologist as fieldworker and the 'foreign' anthropology teacher. One relation between the two is that the personality of fieldworkers influences the way they are able to conduct their research, how the informants are going to view them, and how the researchers might understand what is happening in the field. As has been pointed out, this condition is inescapable. It is possible, however, to become aware of these processes and trace their implications. I suggest that the same holds for 'foreigners' teaching anthropology in the UK. Their 'non-Britishness' will inevitably shape their teaching, presenting limitations as well as advantages. Obviously, being a 'foreign' anthropology teacher only constitutes one of many characteristics that might become relevant in teaching: differences such as gender, age, or ethnicity can all play a role. For the present, however, I specifically address 'foreignness'.

A second parallel with the fieldsite is that the classroom becomes a site of interaction, where foreign teachers and British students encounter a social, cultural, and linguistic Other. In this situation, both students and teachers could alternately assume the role of informants and fieldworkers. It has to be pointed out, though, that the teacher's perspective would ideally have to be complemented by students' experiences with 'foreign' lecturers. While this would involve more intensive research, the present account is based on my own impressions and personal teaching experiences. As a third aspect, teaching anthropology as a foreigner has a special significance, as the

study matter of anthropology -social or cultural differences- is performed, negotiated, or ignored, in the teaching process itself. Thus, two domains are being juxtaposed which are often regarded as separate: anthropological theorising on one side, and the practicalities of dealing with cultural differences on the other. Ironically, one could suspect, this constitutes a situation which psychologists might label 'intercultural communication', a term hardly ever used to refer to any anthropological research endeavour.

Pushing the analogy further, the classroom situation possibly deviates in one crucial aspect from fieldwork: when doing research, the foremost duty of the anthropologist fieldworker seems not only to understand, but to adapt to the behavioural norms prevalent in the community studied. However, this question might be raised anew in the case of 'foreign' anthropology teachers. Are they just academic migrants or visitors, who are tolerated, but ultimately expected to conform to 'local' ways of acting, teaching and communicating (whatever they might be, or the teacher perceive them to be)? To what extent would it be legitimate, or desirable, to consciously emphasise different 'ways of doing things', if one might consider them beneficial for teaching and learning?

In the following, I highlight a few issues arising from the positionality of foreign teachers. In particular, this concerns how their Otherness influences their teaching, and the limitations this presents. It also includes, however, how this Otherness could be used as a resource, especially as the encounter that takes place in the classroom, is of the same kind as those discussed in lectures. Before turning to these issues in more detail, I should briefly mention my background: having completed an MA at a German university, I obtained an MA and PhD degree in Social Anthropology in the UK. I thus had no first-hand experience of undergraduate studies in the UK. I have taught German language in Germany and Indonesia for short periods, but gained most of my teaching experience at the University of Hull as a tutor, and at the University in Lampeter as a temporary lecturer. The following observations are based on these experiences.

### **Ignorance and Competence: Limitations and Possibilities**

The situation of a foreign lecturer is maybe best expressed in a scenario that I have not experienced yet, but which I have always conceived of as perfectly possible. I sometimes imagined how, as I was standing in front of a class of British students, one student would get up and exclaim: '*What are you trying to teach us - you don't even speak the language!*' While this might resemble a nightmare scenario, it indicates one of the main issues one is faced with: one's degree of competence, or deficiency, in speaking English. It also hints at what might be a misleading, but possibly deeply embedded association, which links linguistic competence to academic trustworthiness. Observing ourselves in similar situations, we might realise that we, too, expect language proficiency as proof of scholarly knowledge- although the link can obviously be tenuous. Yet, we ask British students to suspend these preconceptions, and to take one's academic knowledge for granted, even if it comes in imperfect linguistic shape.

The issue of linguistic competence, or lack thereof, points at two conditions between which performance as a foreign teacher oscillates: knowledge and ignorance. I argue that these are key parameters along which being a foreign teacher is being organised. Their teaching performances are crucially characterised by how they utilise, downplay, or highlight different kinds of competence and ignorance. I suggest that these pose disadvantages as well as possibilities, and I discuss some of them in more detail. In particular, I look at English language proficiency, and at the familiarity with social and cultural aspects of British society. I show how varying degrees of competence can limit one's teaching, but also how they represent resources, which can be used productively in the classroom.

### **Linguistic (in)competence**

As mentioned above, one disadvantage of teaching, not being a native English speaker, could be a perceived lack of academic competence. For example, it happened more than once that I used an expression in class which I had so far only come across in writing, and promptly mispronounced it. I once gave three tutorials in a row, in which I repeatedly referred to Malinowski's idea of 'home and hearth'. While no student seemed to object, I started having doubts afterwards myself, consulted a dictionary, and was duly embarrassed. Similarly, in a session on animal classification,

I insisted that in Germany, we had 'gerbils as pets', which must have sounded like having 'Goebbels', a prominent Nazi figure, as a pet. A later check made clear it should indeed have been pronounced 'djerbils'. No-one in class had commented on this, while they had possibly restrained their bewilderment.

In some ways, though, it seemed that my variable linguistic abilities were a source of ambiguity. For example, I once taught a group of mature students, who had a social work background, and were sometimes baffled by the academic jargon they encountered. One day, a student raised her voice accusingly and demanded: *'This article is full of words I don't understand! Like, what does this mean, redolent?'* By chance, I was able to explain this one- which probably only revealed the specificity of one's English language competence. Conversely, while being somewhat fluent in anthropological terminology, I have found myself immediately stranded when trying to express something outside of the immediate realm of anthropology. For example, talking about the island of Borneo, I wanted to briefly mention camps where young Orang Utangs, who had been confiscated from smugglers, were re-trained to take up a life in the wild again. While there exists a term for this in German, I kept looking for the right expression in English, only to end up with a vague and messy description - and the whole process took far more time than was useful in this context.

On the other hand, one's difficulties can sometimes produce reactions from students. For example, I was trying to describe how some young men in Trinidad 'improve' their cars, relating to ideas of identity and masculinity. As I started to explain, I realised that I lacked every single word for these car parts- when a few students, recognising my predicament, started suggesting the appropriate terms, and thus kept the class going. It emerges, though, that one's language abilities demand a delicate balance between maintaining competence, while dealing with one's obvious flaws in a possibly productive way.

This lack of competence might also lead to potentially contentious situations, though, for example when marking essays. If I have the impression that an essay is written in a rather poor style, with imprecise expressions, and incomplete sentences, am I supposed to suggest that the 'student should improve his writing' -? Or should I not rather be careful, and, keeping my own limitations in mind, refrain from commenting on students' English, since anything else would be arrogant? So far, I have followed

the latter approach, although one could argue that my outsider perspective is akin to that of an art critic: I might be able to tell good essay writing from bad, even though I might not be able to write perfect essays myself- but this does not affect my ability to discern between the two.

While imperfect language mostly seem to hamper one's teaching, having more than one linguistic repertoire offers possibilities as well. For example, it can be useful to remind English-speaking students that some terminologies, which they take for granted, take different shape in other languages. Talking about kinship terms, I point out that German distinguishes between male and female cousins, whereas English only refers to 'cousins' in general; that the word, and concept, of 'mature student' is virtually unknown in Germany; or mention that in Germany, conversations between staff and students are usually conducted in formal language, using last names, in contrast to the comparatively informal practices in UK universities. At the same time, this indicates that one can not only employ other linguistic, but also other cultural and social repertoires in the context of teaching anthropology, which I turn to now.

### **Knowing the audience: Social and Cultural Competence**

Being a foreigner supposedly opens some doors, while closing others, though it can seem that many doors remain shut rather than open, when faced with the social and cultural realities of British society, and their manifestations in the classroom. One of the overwhelming difficulties seemed my limited knowledge of British society. In particular, I knew very little about local school systems, and was unfamiliar with what could be called 'undergraduate culture'. This lack of familiarity is a distinct disadvantage, but I also indicate how being an Outsider can be used as a resource.

One of my main misgivings when I first starting giving tutorials, was that I was not able to 'read' the students. I could recognise differences in terms of accent, dress, or behaviour, but I did not know what they meant, and to a large extent I still don't. People's ways of speaking gave me very few clues. The wealth of information in terms of social background, which, I think, is available to me when relating to German people, remains untapped. This constitutes a serious problem, as I probably do not know my audience. It is hard for me to gauge reactions and personalities; to discern

between worries, resentment or incomprehension. I am left guessing: Do students refuse to engage? Are they just shy? Do they need more time? Although my abilities might gradually improve, I might never become fluent in reading non-verbal signs. The only possible advantage could be that I feel less prejudiced- or rather, prejudiced in a different way. I do not know very much about acceptable or unacceptable accents. I have been told about differences between Yorkshire and London accents, but they do not evoke any gut reactions. While I might get some impression of a student's regional background, I do not seem to have strong feelings about any of them. When a student in Hull once admitted to me, somewhat embarrassed, that '*he was local*', I could not respond much - I did not care in the best sense of the word. The only advantage of being ignorant might be just this indifference.

In a more practical sense, though, not having grown up in Britain, and not having been schooled there, poses another challenge: I do not really know what students have gone through when they leave school. I am not sure what kind of knowledge they have; which teaching or learning techniques they have been exposed to, or are comfortable with. The most salient examples I have encountered are class participation, and giving presentations. Again, starting out as a tutor, I was puzzled by the apparent unwillingness of students to speak in class. I am aware that this can have a host of reasons, but one I did not immediately recognise was, possibly, a general reluctance to voice one's opinion in class. Having attended school in Germany, I knew pupils who were bored or disengaged, but tendentially, less afraid of speaking up. I realise I must have annoyed many British students by cheerfully forcing them to contribute in class - trying to draw them out in a way that seemed 'natural' to me, but was possibly quite abhorrent to them. Similarly, I was rather surprised when students giving a short presentation sat next to me in front of the class, their hands shaking, reading out a written text, their voice almost cracking up, and me being worried they might burst into tears. I have consulted other tutors about their experiences; I have been trying to take these things into account; but I probably still often misjudge what students are willing or happy to do.

Finally, I realised that I do not know my audience in the sense of not being very familiar with 'undergraduate culture'. Not having been an undergraduate in the UK myself, I initially, and wrongly, assumed undergraduates to be similar to those I knew

in Germany. I gradually realised that here, undergraduates are often younger; especially first-year students seem to enjoy very much being for the first time away from home. One aspect I was not quite prepared for was the functionality of their choice of courses. As far as I understood, people did not necessarily embark on degrees because they had always been interested in the subject, but frequently out of the necessity to get any kind of social science degree, which would protect them from having to enter the labour market at the lowest level. While I have no misgiving with regards to this, it took me some time to recognise and understand these attitudes, because they seemed to be largely implicit, and taken for granted by everybody else.

Somewhat ironically, I now think that teaching in the UK posed different challenges than teaching in Indonesia, precisely because nobody had warned me of 'cultural differences'. In contrast, when teaching German language at an Indonesian teachers' training college, we, assistant teachers, were carefully instructed what to do and not to do. We were told not to scare or embarrass Indonesian students; never to point out individuals; to avoid all politically or culturally contentious references, such as to communism or sexuality; not to make fun of Islam, and be careful about using the left hand. Leaving the appropriateness of such 'intercultural manuals' aside, I was given no such hints when I started teaching in the UK. It might thus be the subtlety, or the unrecognised differences that have made teaching more difficult, because it took a while to realise that they mattered - without even being able to respond to them appropriately.

Having outlined a range of situations where me being an outsider can be an obstacle, I briefly want to look at ways in which it can also be useful. I suggest that one's 'Otherness' comes into play especially when teaching an introduction to anthropology. Arguably, one of the first concepts to be discussed in first year anthropology courses is that of ethnocentrism. This might sound simplistic, but in my experience there are many undergraduates who have not left England very often, except for trips to Spanish beaches; who might not be very familiar with foreign languages; and who possibly grew up in ethnically homogenous areas. The awareness that other people, elsewhere, view the world differently, can thus not be taken for granted. I therefore suggest that one's Otherness can be employed to

make other people's realities tangible - for example, when appropriate, through presenting attitudes or practices related to German society. The aim would be to present a worldviews different from the ones that British students might be familiar with, while being careful not to exoticise them. Furthermore, one could, ideally, convey an outsider's perspective on their own worlds.

For example, I sometimes point out that it seems common practice in the UK to fit one's bathrooms with carpets, which seemed unremarkable to most students. I then proceed to explain that in Germany, the concept of a carpeted bathroom is quite unthinkable, and regarded with great disgust. For some students, who comfortably recoil in horror at other people's practices, such as the French habit of eating frog legs, it might be good to be reminded that their habits, too, are considered vile elsewhere.

However, this should only be a first instance of a play with 'cultural differences'. Crucially, it should not further accentuate the boundary between 'me', the foreigner, and 'them', the British students. Rather, one's own Otherness should merely represent a starting point to draw out everybody else's. This includes international and British students with all their regional, ethnic, or social specificities. For example, a student from Malaysia might talk about traditional healing practices there, possibly making them more real, and hopefully less exotic. Most importantly, though, we might start to discuss differences among British students - and raise awareness of the fact that ethnic, regional, or family identities are not something that happens elsewhere, but which matters as much within 'British' society. For example, in a session on kinship we examined one students' extended Hull fishing family, and heard about her matriarchal grandmother. Talking about witchcraft, one student talked about his 'Gypsy grandmother', who was said to have 'psychic' qualities, sparking a discussion on witches in the UK. I thus suggest that my own, in many ways an outsider's, perspective on British society, could be utilised to help students recognise their own diversity.

An important element of this can be my ignorance as a foreigner - in the sense that I am unfamiliar with many aspects of life in the UK. This ignorance relates back to the image of the 'classroom as fieldsite', which I referred to at the beginning. The image



suggests that the teacher, as well as students, can turn into informants. As my own ignorance makes students competent informants about their own communities, the usual 'teaching questions' can become sincere enquiries, which students seem to pick up on immediately. For example, again when talking about witchcraft in the UK, it was suggested that many undergraduates had used *ouiji boards* when holding 'spirit sessions'. I had never heard of the term and asked them to explain. A lively discussion followed; many students had something to contribute; suddenly, everybody seemed to be involved. In a way, the level of engagement shown was almost disheartening, when compared with many students' usual restraint in class.

In several instances, I have thus used my lack of knowledge to engage students, and to learn something myself. Topics have included the practices of stag and hen nights when discussing rites of passage; the term *ladettes* in the context of femininity; the edibility of horse meat, or whether it is acceptable to let cats sleep in one's bed, with respect to animal classification. Although these might be rather mundane practices, explaining them might give students a different awareness of them. One could also consider to what extent this temporary role reversal- students enlightening the teacher- could, at least sporadically, reconfigure teacher-student relations, highlighting the diverse distribution of cultural competences.

While ignorance can be a resource, it seems also essential, insofar possible, to occasionally display cultural competence. Although it is hard to gauge, I had the impression that students seemed surprised, but appreciative, whenever I showed any 'local' knowledge. This includes, for example, familiarity with aspects of British history, the monarchy, or elements of popular culture such as television programmes, up to anecdotes such as that of Peter Mandelson going to a chip shop in his Hartlepool constituency, and, not recognising the green stuff on the counter as mushy peas, asking for the guacamole to go with his chips. Such tokens of familiarity with British life can be inappropriate, and backfire embarrassingly, similar to middle-aged teachers attempting 'youth-speak'. They might be useful, however, for counterbalancing an image of all-encompassing ignorance.

## **Conclusion**

My aim was to highlight some aspects in which being a foreigner matters when teaching anthropology. I have suggested that viewing the classroom as fieldsite reveals similarities between teachers and fieldworkers, in the sense that their personalities will influence their teaching and research. The situation of the foreign teacher is characterised by different kinds of knowledge and ignorance, and I have demonstrated a few instances in which this presents obstacles as well as potentials. Especially with respect to teaching anthropology, and its interest in cultural differences, I suggest that one's linguistic and cultural Otherness can be used as a strategic resource. It seems, though, that making use of this Otherness in some contexts can be as vital, as downplaying it in others. While one's foreignness can be employed to convey different perspectives on British society, it is not desirable to constantly exoticise oneself, thus adding a linguistic or ethnic demarcation line to the existing student - teacher boundary. Similarly, I suggest one has to keep a delicate balance between displaying one's ignorance and competence. While ignorance can sometimes be used productively, at other times it would be essential to demonstrate competence. Carefully managing one's knowledge and ignorance, insofar possible, and being aware of how they limit, and extend one's teaching, thus seem crucial when teaching as a foreigner.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that I have mainly discussed attitudes and practices that I, or the students, might be aware of, and which can be consciously manipulated. One has to keep in mind, though, that a large part of our beliefs and practices might remain unrecognised, and possibly unchanged. For example, I could be using the 'wrong' tone when criticising students, without realising it. Similarly, my efforts to encourage people could be interpreted as being aggressive rather than supportive. Apart from issues of 'appropriate' performance, one question posed at the beginning remains: what kind of behaviour should I choose, if I could? There are no immediate answers to these questions, but it might just be worth raising awareness of the subtleties of these encounters in the classroom.

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