**Epistemic Dependency in Global English Language Teaching: Problematizing the Reproduction of Educational Inequalities**

Gene Vasilopoulos, University of Ottawa

Douglas Fleming, University of Ottawa

**Introduction**

This paper re-examines and problematizes the findings in our previously reported study that focused on a state-funded international teacher study-abroad project. The West China Project (WCP) ran between 2015-2018 and involved 243 English language teachers in it’s final year from the Western Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Gansu who came to a research-based university in Eastern Canada for 3 months of intensive English language teacher training. As part of the project, we collected extensive quantitative and qualitative data in Canada during the program and in China once our participants returned home.

Traditionally, as we argue below, research findings in Global English Language Training (ELT) study abroad research highlights dominant themes and a linear transmission of uncontested knowledge from center to periphery. This approach masks a reality that participants in programs that are funded primarily by agencies in positions of authority over them may not understandably be willing to participate unreservedly in recorded interviews/focus groups. For critical researchers, drawing attention to how we interpret participant silence and tension is a question of ethics to un-do dominant discourses that perpetuate epistemic dependency in Global ELT

In this paper, we focus on how *epistemic dependency* in Global ELT (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Morgan, 2015; Phillipson, 2012) is perpetuated in the reporting of Global English research and program evaluation. Theoretically and methodologically, we draw on an *ethico-onto-epistemological approach* (Barad, 2007) and the notion of *diffracting diffractive readings of texts* (Murris & Bozalek, 2019a, 2019b) that are predicated on entanglement and not essentializing identities or reading fixed interpretations.

Our renewed analysis focuses on the silences and tensions aside from the more obvious intended outcomes explicitly stated in the interview and focus group transcripts. Findings include tensions experienced in the program content, program delivery, and data collection; surveillance with the presence of party officials as supervisors/leaders in each class; self-censorship regarding the socio-material reality of teaching including political structures and agency to enact change; and dominant discourse whereby many of interviews and focus groups sounded the same.

In what follows, we first provide some background as to the conditions faced by ELT teaches in China. This is followed by a description of our participants and a brief outline of our original research methodology. We then discuss and apply our theoretical frameworks: the notions of epistemic dependency, ethico-onto-epistemological approaches, the diffractive readings of texts and response-able pedagogy. We conclude by arguing that our field must take into account the types of research challenges we have outlined and adopt ethics related to the notion of *response-able pedagogy* (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017).

**Global ELT, the Chinese Context and the WCP**

The expansion and growth of English as an international language (EIL) has increased the number of people around the world studying this language in different contexts and settings (Block, 2003). As Rod Ellis (2008) argues, teachers in foreign English language teaching and learning contexts face diverse challenges. Student motivation is often low and classes are usually large. This results in significant challenges in terms of classroom management. In addition, the wages for language teachers are commonly low and the available teaching resources limited. Instruction is commonly formal, teacher-centered and form-based. Students in these contexts have few opportunities to use English orally or practice spontaneous conversation. Without exception, the participating teachers faced these challenges. Moreover, as the participants stated, most students in rural China and living in remote communities, feel that they have little use for English.

In China, English instruction has been dominated by a grammar form-focused pedagogy and the memorization of structures provided by the language teacher (Zhang & Li, 2014). However, as Li and Edwards (2013, 2014) note, China has embarked on wholesale educational reform aimed at shifting English instruction from models of pedagogy based on teacher-centered transmission to those that are communicative, task-based and student-centered.

This is an integral part of changing Chinese national educational policy (as outlined in Gu, 2010). To implement the new curricular innovations and to improve the standards of teaching and learning English, the leading Chinese funder of international education, the China Scholarship Council (CSC), funds projects such as the one under study that sends teachers abroad for three months to participate in professional development projects in English speaking countries, including Australia, the UK, the USA, New Zealand, and Canada.

The WCP was delivered at the Faculty of Education at a large research-based bilingual university in Eastern Canada with the assistance of the university’s Language Institute. Extensive consultation around the curricular aspects of the project was held with the CSC, the Embassy of China and the Beijing Languages and Culture University (BLCU). In view of the challenges and trends noted above, the CSC established two broad goals for this project: to help Yunnan English teachers improve their second language teaching practices and to improve their levels of English language proficiency.

The qualitative data that we focus our discussion on here were collected during the last year of the project with thirty-five English language teachers who worked in middle and secondary schools throughout Yunnan and Gansu provinces. Half belonged to various ethnic and linguistic minorities themselves. Although some worked in urban centers, the vast majority came from outlying rural areas within the province. While several were relatively novice teachers, the vast majority had between 3 and 10 years of teaching experience. Some were veterans of over 20 years in the classroom. Three quarters of the teachers were women and one quarter were men. None of the teachers came from middle- or upper-income brackets. Some were homeroom teachers or heads of their local school English teaching department. However, most were classroom teachers with no additional responsibilities. All had English as their teaching subject.

In consultation with CSC, the provincial educational authority selected schools from various localities to participate in this project. Local school principals and colleagues then nominated who would be asked to participate and most were enthusiastic about participating in the project, especially in view of the fact that most had never travelled beyond their home province. The teachers first participated in a month-long orientation to North American culture and pedagogy at BLCU.

At the host Canadian university, the team of multicultural and multilingual professors and graduate students who delivered and designed the project were specialists in second language education. Most had extensive international teaching experience (several in China). Three professors and four graduate students formed the core of the teaching staff. Numerous undergraduate students were employed as one-on-one language facilitators. A manager organized the extra-curricular activities, tended to the logistics and provided orientation.

The syllabus was first drafted by myself, the lead professor, in consultation with the teaching team. The syllabus was then sent to CSC and Chinese Embassy for feedback. After several months of negotiations between these Chinese officials and the university, the syllabus was finalized and the logistics, accommodations and financial arrangements approved.

Upon arrival, the teachers were accommodated in university residences and given orientations to local stores, resources, the university and city. The three-month program started with extensive visits to local schools over the course of two weeks. This was followed by a two-week introduction to pedagogical technology in computer laboratories and a one-week set of special lectures on learning theory.

As a rule, most mornings started with a lecture on such topics as concrete approaches to lesson-planning, overall curriculum design, general linguistics, the creation and adaption of teaching materials, the role of grammar, bilingualism, decentralized curriculum decision-making; student-centered pedagogical approaches, anti-racist education, critical multiculturalism, alternate forms of educational leadership, critical curriculum theory, problematizing Canadian culture, multicultural citizenship, globalization and post-colonial discourse.

In the late mornings and afternoons, small group “hands on” workshops centered on concrete aspects of teaching practice, classroom activities and material development. The thirty-five teachers were divided into small breakout groups with the aim of providing more personalized opportunities for teaching strategies practice and English language conversation.

Throughout the project, the teachers went on field trips and socio-cultural outings to various local points of interest, such as the museums, local music and ethnic festivals, and local government, and given the opportunity to go on overnight trips to urban centers in the rest of the province. The most significant of the extra-curricular activities, however, was a visit to a local First Nation school, where they learned about First Nation educational philosophy and met students, teachers, administrators and elders in the community. It is noteworthy that the project endeavored to employ elements of indigenous models of education. That is, the project strived to create a learning environment that “honors the culture, language and world view” of students, as well as honoring “who they are and where they have come from” (Toulouse, 2017, p. 1).

Most importantly, the project was designed to provide critical content (in both lectures and workshops) via a decentralized delivery instruction model focused on the visiting teachers’ needs and realities. Changes in curricular content occurred when it became clear, for example, the teachers needed help in designing group work tasks. The overall emphasis was on helping the teachers adapt communicative approaches to their local teaching conditions. Moreover, the project content explicitly problematized the political nature of English teaching, the notions of native speaker, standardized privileged Anglo-American “core” English, and binary stereotypes of Eastern and Western pedagogy.

**Initial Data Collection:**

**Findings from Ongoing WCP Program Evaluations and Research:**

The data collection and analysis efforts in the WCP produced robust findings in terms of teacher participant learning outcomes and positive impacts on local teaching as well as limitations of the curriculum and barriers to implementation of teaching to local contexts. Reported post-program benefits centered on improved English language proficiency, increased confidence as an EFL teacher, extended knowledge of language teaching methods, formation of communities of practice, and deepened inter-cultural experience. Data revealed that teacher participants improved English language proficiency both real as measured through pre-program and post-program listening tests and perceived as expressed in participant interviews. Closely associated with improved linguistic proficiency, participants expressed increased confidence in their capacity as EFL teachers to provide accurate and varied linguistic input in their classroom teaching. Greater awareness of language teaching methods modelled by the WCP instructors and analyzed in the methodology workshops was another dimension that contributed to increased teacher confidence. Inter-cultural experiences communicating with Canadian (English language speaking) teachers, university staff, and local community members augmented participants’ confidence and perceived legitimacy as EFL teachers, namely an English language speaker capable of communicating effectively in authentic contexts. Lastly, participants reported the formation of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as networks for professional development and support amongst the visiting teachers themselves and with WCP instructions and staff.

These outcomes transfer over to positive impacts in their local teaching context. Focus groups, interviews, and classroom observations conducted in our 2018 visit to China confirmed that across the cohorts, participants reported learning outcomes from their experience in the WCP lead to increased student enthusiasm for English class in part because they had developed novel teaching methods and strategies of a communicative nature that better engaged students and also because their ability to integrate Canadian culture into their teaching and appeal to their students’ curiosity for international travel through their experience abroad. Participants also confirmed the long-lasting impact of the program on their EFL teaching career: months and years after their study abroad experience, participants were still inspired to continue learning, improving, and serving their students and school system. Tangible transformations were evidenced in the sustained networks formed during the study abroad period, but mostly evidenced through promotions to leadership positions within their schools and districts upon return from Canada.

Our findings of “benefits” are consistent with those of similar Chinese-government funded English language teacher professional development programs hosted at Western Anglophone universities. Most notably, Li, Zhang and Edwards’ (2016) review of Chinese sponsored in-service ELT PD programs in the UK reports: “changes in participants teaching philosophy and teaching practices, enhancement in competences such as their English proficiency, lesson planning and implementation and cultural awareness, as well as assumption of new leadership roles and enhanced interest in research” (pg. 191). Here, we emphasis the similarity between the WCP and programs involved in Li, Zhang, and Edward’s work as large-scale Chinese government initiatives, a point central to our argument and one that we return to in subsequent sections.

Beside the positive outcomes reported by the WCP participants, there was also mention of challenges and limitations. Pacek (1996) advocates for the reporting of “negative outcomes” in language teacher program evaluation to further improve the program curriculum. Data collected post-program in Canada, and later in China, revealed concern over the appropriateness of WCP curriculum. Misalignment between the program content and methods related primarily to the technology modules and logistic constraints in rural communities with varying degrees of institutional support, limited technological resources, centralized curricula built on regional model, and most importantly, low motivation for English language education. In both post-program interviews and data collected in China, participants raised the re-occurring theme of incompatibility between idealistic teaching methods and the real conditions and minimal affordances within their local communities. Such misalignment has been thoroughly documented in other studies on similar programs (Li & Edwards, 2013, 2014; Hong & Pawan, 2014; Zhao & Mantero, 2018), and while designing quality Global ELT PD are critical issues, this paper focuses on another perhaps more veiled aspect of Global ELT, that of reporting study abroad research from inner-circle nations.

**Methodological Problematics with Global ELT Research and Epistemic Dependency:**

Epistemic dependency has long been perpetuated in the reporting of Global ELT research (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Morgan, 2015; Phillipson, 2012) have argued. Epistemic dependency refers to the dominance of Western-based knowledge through concepts and domains in Global ELT that sustain Western superiority, the most prominent being native speaker norms, followed by field terminologies (EFL, etc.), Western knowledge production, center-based methods, center-based cultural competence, and the text-book industry. Western-based ‘epistemes’ are taken-for granted in Global ELT; countering epistemic dependency and the self-marginalization of learners from the outer circle requires raising awareness of how teacher from the periphery is positioned in various historical and institutional contexts and by space for teacher identity negotiation and transformation (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). The notion of epistemic dependency extends to Western-centric research methodologies and discursive practices that centralize and regulate disciplinary knowledge systems and define the identities and subjectivities of those involved as researcher/researched. Herein, we focus on our complicity as Center-based/inner-circle researchers in sustaining this dependency by failing to interrogate our subject position as “experts”. Indeed, the existence of a Western centre depends on the existence of a periphery (Morgan, 2015), and inadvertently, our research methods and epistemes may be contributing to these effects. Morgan’s (2015) observation relates to how Global ELT research (to which we include teacher study abroad programs) is framed through Western empiricism that privileges empirically derived facts and truths as the basis for decision-making while overlooking values and ideologies that perhaps bear equal consequence.

 Traditional Western empiricism is especially pronounced in program evaluation, defined by Keily as “a set of strategies to document and understand the programme (sic). It involves research activity (conventional studies or action research by which teachers learn about and transform aspects of their practice) and assessment data (conventional measures of outcomes)” (2009, p. 114). Principles of language program evaluation reflect largely positivist/post-positivist paradigms, and involve social science research methods, particularly surveys, focused on improvement, satisfaction, and impact (Keily, 2019). The logic of program evaluation is linear: program evaluation reflects the learning, investment, and transformation experienced because of the program; from these findings, measures of program quality can directly contribute to understanding program effectiveness (Keily, 2019). Reporting positive outcomes from Global ELT study abroad professional development programs informs future program design and delivery, further improving language teaching around the world. While this is a commendable goal, reporting exclusively, on primarily positive outcomes in research also inadvertently serves to promote epistemic dependency.

Returning back to the positive outcomes revealed in the WCP research as confirmed in Li, Zhang, and Edwards (2016), reviews of Chinese government-sponsored international ELT professional development, we turn attention to the roles of researcher/research participant. In both cases, the WCP and the multiple studies associated with similar programs in the UK (Li, Zhang & Edwards, 2016), evaluators and researchers were also heavily involved in the program delivery and in many cases shared an instructor-trainee relationship. Keily advocates for internal evaluation as opposed to the “disinterested” and presumably “objective assessment” provided by external evaluators (2019, p.89). Internal evaluators, as advocates for the program bring a development agenda that seeks to improve the program, and this commitment from program providers is a dimension not easily captured from a distant external view (Keily, 2019). Yet, as language researchers, we are fully aware that the absence of third-party researchers for program-evaluation casts doubt on researcher objectivity and the trustworthiness of the data (Wang et al., 2019). Li, Zhang and Edwards concede

the disadvantages of our ‘insider’ status as researchers trying to evaluate a course in which we played a key part in designing and delivering. People who had known and worked with us over a period of three months might well find it difficult to be frank in assessments of their experience” (2016, p. 196).

Transparently, they detail the range of measures taken to counteract these effects including assigning interviewing responsibilities to non-instructional staff who did not share a teacher-learner relationship with interviewees. Critical reflection of positionality vis-à-vis program host-instructor-researcher and visiting-teaching-trainee-participant is perhaps the first step in attuning to the “social, cultural and historical identity of the programme (sic), as a product of the institution, as a phase in the biographies of participants, and as context of personal investments of individual stakeholders” that constitute the program evaluation (Kiely, 2009, p. 114). We interpret Kiely’s guidance to suggest that responsible language program evaluators and researcher must not ignore the persistent power imbalance between Centre-based institutions, such as the host university located in an urban city, in contrast to that of the visiting teachers as outer-circle language learners from considerably less-prosperous communities in China.

In other words, herein, we advocate for, and demonstrate, what it might look like to consider the entanglement of not only the participants’ biographies, but also that of the researcher and the institution, in the construction of the data and in the reporting of the research. Such a shift entails adopting an epistemic stance different from “conventional” language research/program evaluation if the goal is to interrogate the epistemic dependency that reifies a unidirectional transmission of knowledge in English language education from inner circle to outer in Global ELT. We must then ask ourselves: How can we report language program evaluation research that presume cause-effect linearity, fixed identities and trajectories without the reinforcing the centre-periphery dichotomy? How can we do Global ELT research that is critical of our subject positions? What does this research look like? Arguably, addressing these questions requires abandoning traditional empiricism and adopting of a relational ontology of diffractive reading and *response-able* methodologies.

**Methodology:**

In educational research, *epistemology* refers to the different kinds of knowledge claims and how we come to know, while *ontology* refers to the nature of the world, reality, and existence (Scott & Usher, 1996). Relational ontology, Wildman (2010) explains the “is simply the relations between entities are ontological more fundamental than the entities themselves. This contrasts with substantive ontology in which entities are ontologically primary and relations ontologically derivative” (2010, p. 55). Relational ontology accounts for the socio-material-affective entanglement between participants, researchers, affective, material, structures and realities (Barad, 2007). For Barad (2007), engaging relational ontologies entails an *ethico*-*onto*-*epistemological* shift predicated on entanglement and not essentializing identities or reading fixed interpretations (Murris & Bozalek, 2019a, 2019b; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017).

For the WCP, entanglement between the human actors in the program (visting teachers, research participants, instructors, administrators, researchers) connects to the affective, material, and structural realities of international professional development and Global ELT. This includes that status and expertise of Western-center institutions, the expectations of program participants and sponsors, and the marginality of many visiting teachers within national bureaucracies as well as their marginality internationally as outer circle English language learners. For the WCP, the conditions of the program may bear on the research process (i.e. the WCP was financed by the Chinese Scholarship Council generating substantive revenue for the host university; WCP program administrators were expected to lead a program considered successful by funding agencies to guarantee repeat contracts; teacher participants were individually nominated by their school programs, a great honour; teachers participants were expected to develop their language and teaching capacities and return to lead their peers.

Methodologically, an ethico-onto-epistemological shift in relational thinking is situated within post-qualitative research, an orientation that goes beyond conventional humanist qualitative inquiry to examine how research methods can address the complexity of researcher-participant identities within broader dynamic relations and contexts (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011). More concretely, this means acknowledging the entanglement of the host-expert-researcher and visiting teacher-trainee-participant in the interview process. In this paper, we focus specifically on interview and focus/group data for it served as the primary data source in the WCP program evaluation/research. To this effect, we interrogate our data to explore different ways of interpreting oral exchanges between researchers and participants (Honan, 2014).

We interrogate our data through a process of diffractive reading (Barad, 2007).

Educational researchers describe the methodology of diffractive reading as “learning to resist representational patterns and thinking” (Honeyford & Ntelioglou, 2021 p. 431) where

diffractive reading is unlike a literature review as the latter assumes that you are at a distance of the literature, having a bird’s eye point of view − creating an overview by comparing, contrasting, juxtaposing or looking for similarities and themes. A diffractive reading, on the other hand, does not foreground any texts as foundational, but through reading texts through one another, comes to new insights. (Murris & Bozalek, 2019a, pp. 1505–1506).

Our diffractive reading of the data means accounting for means accounting for elements that exceed what is directly stated by the participant and recognizing that realities are constructed and actively reproduce in the social world: “meaning is bounded in the materiality of ‘things’ and the practices within which concepts are performed, contextually and historically” (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013, p. 9). In that sense, the information shared by participants in interviews are shaped by more than their experience in the program as reported through the data collection instrument. It is shaped by their relationship to the interviewers, the program, the program sponsoring agencies, the possible trajectories that might emerge from their involvement in the program. Similarly, the questions posed by the interviewers later analyzed and interpreted to produce reports for administrative review are shaped by conditions that exceed what the interview transcript contents.

Emergence of new insights is central to the notion of diffractive reading as it allows the reader the ability to respond to the texts rather than stop at representation and literal interpretation. Diffractive reading is paying

close respectful responsive and *response-able (*enabling response) attention to the details of a text; that is, it is important to try to do justice to a text. It is about taking what you find inventive and trying to work carefully with the details of patterns of thinking (in their very materiality) that might take you somewhere interesting that you never would have predicted. Its about working reiteratively, reworking the spacetimemattering of thought patterns; not about leaving behind or turning away from. (Juelskaer and Schwennesen, 2012, p. 13, emphasis in original).

Response-able reading and methodologies involve careful attentiveness, responsibility/accountability, rendering each other capable and the ability to respond (Murris & Bozalek, 2019b p. 881). Attentiveness involves reading the fine details of texts care-fully to ascertain what is and what is not being expressed. What else in happening in this exchange that is not captured in the transcript? What interpretation do I give the statements made in the interview? How can I represent these responses, both the articulated and unarticulated, in my research? How do I represent this data in my research? Extending attentiveness, responsibility or accountability allows us to explore the implications of our research provoking ethical consideration in the reporting phase: What can we do with our analysis of the data, and more importantly, what should we do with it?

Referring to Barad (2007), Murris and Bozalek (2019b, p. 881) pose: What commitments to ourselves and the texts are we willing to take on? Response-able readings of texts are ethical practices; they are not simply a critique to deconstruct and label “wrong”. Rather, response-able reading is based on an ethics of entanglement that brings interpretation back to the reader/audience and their capacity to respond, again, not by labeling in binary fixed categories as true/false/right/wrong (Murris & Bozalek, 2019a, 2019b; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). To reiterate, the purpose of response-able reading is to invoke the capacity to respond because continuing to assert fixed truths in the name of scientificity of language program evaluation and research sustains epistemic dependency in Global ELT and international professional development. Not deploying alternative research methods and epistemes to language program evaluation maintains the deductive logic that training imparted by inner circle countries on participants from outer circle nations can be primarily credited for improvements seen in teacher development and practice. Such unquestioned thinking further reifies the superiority of the Center as sources of expertise to be imparted on recipients from outer nations.

**Utility of Response-able Methodologies to WCP Research**

Our turn to response-able methodologies extends from the overwhelming consistency in post-program data collected in Canada across the 4 cohorts. Below, we outline the conditions of the data collection across the 4 cohorts in Canada and data collection in China that complicate the reliability of the interview data as complete and fixed representations of participants’ experience in the program:

* Towing the party line and a dominant discourse of gratitude for the opportunity to study abroad

As explained above, the program was entirely funded by the Chinese Scholarship Council. Most participants were English language teachers in K-12 public schools across the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Gansu. The selection process was long and competitive: participants were nominated by the principle, vetted, and interviewed by regional education administrators. Only one teacher per district could be selected. Prior to departing for Canada, teacher received one-month of extensive training at Beijing Culture and Language University, followed by 3 months of training at the University of Ottawa. As noted above, for most of the participants, this was their first time to travel outside of China and being selected was a coveted once-in-a life-time opportunity. Naturally, many of the participants expressed gratitude to the national funding agency for this opportunity and were widely supportive of national and regional educational policies and practices.

* Self-censorship regarding local conditions and policies, and ambivalence towards the enactment of systematic change (blocked possibility of transformation outside of the classroom)

Participant gratitude becomes relevant when we consider responses to interview questions related to local conditions and policies. For example, while the teachers expressed interest in alternative modes of assessment introduced in the program curriculum, in the interviews, most teachers approved of their current system of centralized standardized testing in the English classroom. Likewise, program content to promote teacher autonomy through the integration of technology was critiqued. Most believed that technology integration would be unfeasible and taking steps to request additional resources or government support to implement activities requiring technologies was quickly deflected.

* Group surveillance through the presence of party official as supervisors present in class and in focus group interview

Not all participants were teachers. Prior to arrival in Canada, cohorts were divided into teams with a hierarchy of leaders and supervisors responsible for the teachers while abroad. Similarly, government officials accompanied each cohort throughout the 3-month period. Focus groups and interviews were supervisors outside of the research team with leaders and representatives present in each focus group interview. Similarly, supervisors were present in all classroom observations.

* Providing interview/focus group questions in advance

Supervisors requested that interview/focus group questions be provided in advance so that participants could be prepared to meaningfully respond. It is unclear whether the grouping for focus groups eased individual participants concerns about anonymity and confidentiality, and whether participants collectively pre-planned interview and focus group responses.

* Dominant discourse of singing from the choir book

Ultimately, dominant discourses as reported in the findings above gave us the sense that alternative methods of reading the data could offer a deeper and more complex understanding of the programs’ effect on language teacher professional development. To highlight these possibilities, we draw on three provocative excerpts from participants made at different phases of the data collection.

**Response-able Reading in Action:**

The first except comes from Noreen[[1]](#footnote-1), a teacher from Gansu who attended the program in 2018. In October 2018, the research team visited Gansu, and Noreen participated in a focus group interview with male teachers from the same cohort.

Vignette 1:

*Interviewer: What did you learn from the school visits or from the teaching at the university?*

*Noreen: Yeah, I can see you can put the Bible is your classroom. But in China, you can’t put*

*anything that's related to the religion. You can’t and you really take some turtle, rabbit, squirrel,* *into your classroom. It is a happy world for the children. In China, you see the conditions.* *Especially here, not very good. Even if we want to some activities, the space is not enough. Too* *many students, but the space is very limited. And some, sometimes we'd like to use some scenes* *(art) that we all make. It makes a class, very interesting. We can have the material. (Gansu Focus Group 2, 1:43)*

Three months had passed since Noreen returned from Canada and nearly six months since she attended Canadian schools as part of the school visits. It is notable that she refers to a teacher having a Bible in the classroom as the first response especially when the issue of religion was intentionally untouched in the data collection process despite the participants’ wide-ranging ethnic-linguistic-religious diversity. The two male teachers participating in the same focus group were Muslim, a fact they disclosed to their cohort and the WCP instructional team months after their arrival and only when confronted with the dietary restrictions; thus, referring to the bible was even more peculiar. What meaning can be given to Noreen’s response? Likewise, Noreen’s comments about bringing in live animals, turtle, rabbit, and squirrel (presumably to entertain the children) made us wonder how these bodies connect to a “happy world”. From this testimony, should we conclude that Canada has more resources and freedoms therefore is “better” than the conditions in China? Another reading of the data might focus on the agency that Noreen describes in operationalizing limited space and resources, a skill that may (or may not) be attributed to her learning from the training program. The point we wish to make here is that this data excerpt could be read in multiple ways.

The second vignette refers to data collected in an individual interview in 2017. The exchange is between the interviewer (first author and an instructor in the program), and Luke, a teacher in one of her classes. Luke tells the interviewer that he “want(s) to be honest with people” pointing to the unspoken tensions about the program content and delivery and what can be expressed.

Vignette 2:

*Interviewer (II: Did you find it (your training in Beijing University of Language and Culture prior to leaving China) helpful?*

*Luke (L): A little.*

*I: Ok. Did you find it helpful?*

*L: (Long pause…silence)*

*I: It doesn’t matter, you don’t have to tell me. So, you said a little. Can you tell me more about your training in BULC?*

*L: I don’t know (laughing).*

*I: Ok. That’s ok. (laughing).*

*L: Because I want to be honest with people. Most people answer this questions, I guess, well they will say I think it was a great help for them, but to be honest, I don’t think so... I think Beijing was to make us, to train us to be a student. To train us to sit for 8 hours…. Yes, but don’t forget, not only are we students, but we are also teachers. Sometimes I want to be a student, sometimes I want to be a teacher too. So sometimes I am a student, but outside of class, equal relations you and I, we have to learn from each other, we have respect for each other. If I find that i am not interested in what you teach, you should change your teaching style maybe*

*(Luke interview, 38:48)*

Notable in this excerpt is the shift in subject position from the experience in Beijing to “we” and then “you” and what “you” teach, literally referring to the interviewer/instructor. What meaning can be given to the shift in subject positions? This might be interpreted as a generalization and not intended at the interlocutor, or it might be an indirect way of expressing his views on the instructor-learner relationship experienced.

Reading Luke’s data diffractively against other texts, we might conclude that he is resisting and contesting the imposed identity of novice and learner. This becomes clearer when we connect his testimony above to a later excerpt where he reverses the positionality of Western Anglophone nations as experts.

Vignette 3: “You should learn something from China.”

*I: If you can, maybe say in one sentence or a few sentences, your overall experience here in the program.*

*L: It’s a wonderful experience for me. It is the first time for me to go abroad, especially to go to a developed country. You gave us the opportunity to come here, it will change our idea of education for kids of course.*

*I: Do you think your students will appreciate your new teaching?*

*L: Yes of course. We have to learn something, but you should learn something from China. Why, you know why?... It mentioned from the TV report last year, the UK needs the 40 math teacher. You know why? They have to learn something from China. You know most teacher, they need something, you know most young people are good at doing math. (L interview, 43:20).*

Again, the reversal in subject position from Canada as expert source and China as receiver is telling of Luke’s positionality in the program, and this data is clearly relevant in understanding participants’ experience with Global ELT study abroad. The problem, though, is that such data as micro-counter narratives do not fit into research designed to measure the effectiveness and impact of program curriculum. As such, these perspectives expressed by Noreen and Luke rarely make it to press, a move that maintain the sterling illusion of Center-expertise imparted on Periphery-novices.

**Conclusion**

As we note above, our earlier analysis of the findings associated with the WCP presented dominant themes and fixed interpretations that highlighted a linear relationship between researchers and participants. In the context, this represented a unilateral and uncontested transmission of knowledge from center to periphery.

We argue that the power relations involved complicated the trustworthiness of the data and thus our interpretation of it. Of course, as we note above, all research is conducted within the contexts of power relations. However, we feel that the inequitable balance of power relations in the WCP were glaring, even though one of the primary objectives of the project was to conduct a learning environment that was decolonized. Despite our best efforts as researchers, teachers, and administrators to mitigate these inequities, we were only able to do so much. However, as we have demonstrated above, there were a number of instances in which these inequities came through in the data. In these instances, participant frustration and openness to resistance are evident. However, the opportunities to explore these tendencies were very limited. These limitations were not simply due to logistical challenges, but were also due to the very real need to protect the integrity of participants.

Response-able methodologies, like the ones we have described above, allow researchers to focus on messy data and differences found within data as opposed to similarities, prevalence, or intended outcomes. Doing so allows us to problematize essentialized concepts in Global ELT and the reporting of research. More importantly, the un-doing of dominant discourses and the work of non-essentializing subject positions are not simply in the interests of gathering trustworthy data. As we hope we have made clear, it is also a question of ethics.

References:

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning.* Duke University Press.

Block, D. (2003). The social turn in second language acquisition. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

Bozalek, V., & Zembylas, M. (2017) Towards a response-able pedagogy across higher education institutions in postapartheid South Africa: An ethico-political analysis. *Education as Change, 21*(2), 62–85.

Ellis, R. (2008). Understanding second language acquisition. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gu, M. M. (2010). Identities constructed in difference: English language learners in China. Journal of Pragmatics, 42(1), 139-152.

Honan. (2014). Disrupting the habit of interviewing. *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology,* 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.7577/rerm.929>

Honeyford, M., & Ntelioglou, B. Y. (2021). Beyond “Trying to Find a Number”: Proposing a Relational Ontology for Reconceptualizing Assessment in K−12 Language and Literacy Classrooms. *Canadian Modern Language Review, 77*(4), 427–446. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr-2020-0098>

Hong, P. & Pawan, F. (2014). *The pedagogy of practice of Western-trained Chinese English language teachers*. Routledge.

Juelskjaer, M., & Schwennesen, N. (2012). Intra-active entanglements: an interview with Karen Barad. *Kvinder, Koen og Forskning, 21*(1–2), 10–23.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2012). Individual identity, cultural globalization and teaching English as an international language: The case for an epistemic break. In L. Alsagoff, W. Renandya, G. Hu, & S. L. Mckay (Eds.), *Teaching English as an international language: Principles and practices* (pp. 9-27). Routledge.

Kiely, R. (2019). Evaluating English language teacher education programmes. In *The Routledge handbook of English language teacher education* (pp. 82-95). Routledge.

Lather, P., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2013). Post-qualitative research. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, *26*(6), 629-633.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Li, D., & Edwards, V. (2013). The impact of overseas training on curriculum innovation and change in English language education in Western China. *Language Teaching Research, 17*(4), 390–408.

Li, D., & Edwards, V. (2014). English language teaching and educational reform in Western China: A knowledge management perspective. *System, 47*, 88–101.

Li, D. & Edwards, V. (2017). Overseas training of Chinese secondary teachers of English. In N. Van Deusen-Scholl & S. May (Eds.), *Second and foreign language education* (pp. 373–383). Springer International Publishing. DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-02246-8\_21

Li, D., Zhang, X., & Edwards, V. (2016). Innovation and change in English teaching in the western provinces of China: The impact of overseas training. In *Educational Development in Western China* (pp. 191-215). Brill Sense.

Murris, K., & Bozalek, V. (2019a). Diffracting diffractive readings of texts as methodology: Some propositions. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *51*(14), 1504-1517.

Murris, K. & Bozalek, V. (2019b). Diffraction and response-able reading of texts: the relational ontologies of Barad and Deleuze. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 32*(7), 872–886. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1609122>

Morgan, B. (2015). Language Teacher Education and the Developing World: Exploring Horizons of Possibility for Identity and Agency. *Linguistics & the Human Sciences*, *11*(1).

Pacek, D. (1996). Lessons to be learnt from negative evaluation. *ELT Journal, 50*(4), 335-343.

Phillipson, R. (2012). Linguistic imperialism. *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*, 1-7.

Scott, D., & Usher, R. (Eds.). (1996). *Understanding educational research*. Psychology Press.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2011). Post qualitative research: The critique and the coming after. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 611–625). Sage.

Toulouse, P. (2017). Integrating aboriginal teaching and values into the

classroom. Retrieved from http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-3/.

Wang, F., Clarke, A., & Webb, A.S. (2019). Tailored for China: Did it work? Reflections on an intensive study abroad programme for Chinese student teachers. *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(7), 800-820.

Wildman, W. J. (2010). An introduction to relational ontology. In J. Polkinghorne & J. Zizioulas (Eds.), *The trinity and an entangled world: Relationality in physical science and theology* (pp. 55-73). Erdmans.

Zhang, X. & Li, B. (2014). Grammar teaching in the communicative classroom based on focus on form theory. Paper presented May 2014 at Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, doi:10.2991/icelaic---14.2014.73.

Zhao, Y. & Mantero, M. (2018). The Influence of Study-Abroad Experiences on Chinese College EFL Teacher’s Identity. *IJELTAL (Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics), 3*(1), 53–77.

1. Pseudonym selected by the participant [↑](#footnote-ref-1)