

From: *ELT Journal* April 2015 doi: 10.1093/elt/ccv019

*Researching Cultures of Learning. International Perspectives on Language Learning and Education.*

Edited by Martin Cortazzi and Lixian Jin. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

9780230321328

*Researching Intercultural Learning. Investigations in Language and Education.*

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At the end of the introduction to *Researching Cultures of Learning*, the editors suggest that this book can be usefully seen in conjunction with two others, one from 2011 entitled *Researching Chinese Learners* and one from 2013 (i.e. the same year as *Researching Cultures of Learning*) entitled *Researching Intercultural Learning*. Although there is no equivalent statement in the latter, I will follow the editors' suggestion and consider the two 2013 books together. Ultimately, as we shall see, there is little distinction between the two books, despite their different titles. Many chapters in *Researching Intercultural Learning* make reference to 'cultures of learning' and do not take up explicitly the issues of 'intercultural learning' which the editors discuss in their introduction.

These are two substantial books, totalling some 600 pages, representing a major editing achievement on the part of Jin and Cortazzi, and are an indication of their wide knowledge of the field and rich network of researchers. A perusal of the Notes on Contributors in both books makes interesting reading in itself as it reveals the range of countries and researchers now involved.

I do not presume to summarise the contents of either book in detail since this is done more than adequately by the editors in the respective introductions. Suffice it to say that there are chapters from a large number of countries although the weight is on Europe and Asia, and the UK and China in particular. This is not surprising in view of the editors' well known and respected previous work over many years in China and with Chinese learners. To say that Africa, West Asia, and in particular South America are under-represented is not to criticise the editors since they do not set out to produce an international handbook, but it is nonetheless symptomatic of our current biases in research on matters intercultural.

Almost all the chapters are reports of empirical research and for anyone looking for empirical findings from a specific country or on a specific issue – such as motivation research in contexts outside the traditional focus on learners in Europe and North America – these books

are a rich source. Researchers will also find, by reading ‘across’ the chapters, a range of research designs and data collection techniques, which might inspire and influence their own projects. One group of readers I can imagine using these books is novice researchers wishing to gain an overview of approaches to work on intercultural learning; they will benefit from looking carefully at the list of contents to identify what might help them. They will also find brief but helpful indexes in both books, for which readers will be all the more grateful if they know the labour involved in good indexing. Other, more experienced researchers will probably use the books in a different way, searching for research on topics which they are themselves engaged with or wish to start exploring. Here the detail of the empirical reports is important and, in most chapters, is provided in more detail than can sometimes be found in journal articles restricted in length. For both groups of readers the editors’ introductory summaries of the chapters are very useful as a means of finding what they need. Only reviewers of such books start at the beginning and read consequentially to the end.

Introductions to such books also have an obligation to explain their purpose and it is at this point that I need to consider them separately and begin to evaluate as well as describe.

*Researching Cultures of Learning* is a title which makes a deliberate reference to the concept ‘cultures of learning’ which Cortazzi and Jin have been working with for many years. They say this in the introduction which has a section on ‘A pedigree for cultures of learning, 1970s to 1990s’. It is a little puzzling why they stop in the 1990s but they conclude the section by saying ‘The present book of research studies takes cultures of learning in further directions’. For any reader who is not familiar with this term and the research associated with it, the ‘pedigree’ is enriched by the first chapter of the book, written by Yuan Yuan and Qun Yie. It is laudable that the editors have included this chapter, which not only explicates their key concept, but also presents some substantial criticisms and indications of what is needed in further work with the concept.

It is here that my first ‘however’ appears. If readers are looking for a substantial and systematic use of the concept in the rest of the book, one where authors would demonstrate how the concept has influenced their empirical work, and how their empirical work might challenge and develop the concept, as the editors and the authors of Chapter 1 suggest, they will be disappointed. Although some but by no means all of the chapters refer to the term ‘culture of learning’, they mostly do so without using the concept analytically. The final section of the book, with chapters on ‘The Dynamics of Socialization and Motivation in Cultures of Learning’, has in fact no reference to the concept.

Perhaps it is not surprising that one exception is a chapter where Cortazzi is the second author, in a report on ‘Kazakh Students’ Perceptions of Good English Teachers: Multiple Heritages in a Culture of Learning’. This chapter, like most others, provides first a useful description of the situation and one way of using the book would be to compare and contrast learning in the many situations represented in the various chapters. It also includes, as do other chapters, a review and evaluation of previous related research. The body of the chapter then presents data on Kazakh learners’ expectations of their teachers, and locates these within

an analysis of the multiple layered influences of socio-cultural phenomena, including the legacy of theorising about learning from Soviet times, the Islamic conceptualisation of learning and teaching, and the influence from ELT pedagogy brought into Kazakhstan more recently. The authors then argue that the data show, for example, 'how a teacher was using Vygotskian concepts on collaborative learning (scaffolding, mediating activities) and made this pedagogical framework explicit to learners' (p. 191). Perhaps there has to be a degree of speculation in the interpretation of specific empirical data and their connection with large-scale cultural influences over many decades or centuries, and this is revealed with such phrases as 'ideas about knowledge and teachers could be of Islamic origin' (p. 189).

Furthermore, it is not possible in a chapter to present all the data that support what is said, but this chapter begins to respond to some of the criticisms made in Chapter 1 and to show how the concept of 'cultures of learning' can be used. It does not explicitly take up the challenge of considering how empirical data can be used to review and renew theory. This is perhaps asking too much, but this chapter is exemplary in using 'cultures of learning' as an analytical tool.

I would have liked to see many more chapters taking the concept seriously, as this one does, rather than just mentioning it in passing – perhaps as a nod to the title of the book – for then the book would have had greater coherence. Instead of which there is still a tendency to generalise and 'to essentialize and polarize the 'Western' culture and 'oriental' (sic) culture' as Yuan Yuan and Qun Xie say in their critique (p.34); they juxtapose a capitalised 'Western' with a lower-case 'oriental' in an unexplained way.

A particularly striking example of essentialization and polarization is a chapter on 'Cultural Models, Children's Beliefs and Parental Socialization: European American and Chinese Learning' where the term 'European American' appears to be a synonym for 'Western'. Interestingly one of this author's earlier articles to which they refer is entitled 'U.S. and Chinese cultural beliefs about learning' but in either case the labelling indicates the over-generalisation which 'cultures of learning' theory needs to overcome. This chapter also raises, unwittingly, a question not explicitly addressed in other chapters either: the issue of the languages in which data are collected. The author says 'European American' and Chinese learners were asked to freely associate in their respective languages with 'the English term *learn/learning* and its Chinese equivalent *xuexi*' (the Chinese characters are also given). We are being implicitly asked to accept that there is equivalence and that, when data are translated, the translation itself does not create new data. There is no indication that the author is aware of the potential problem, and other chapters too treat the question of translation as unproblematic. For example, in one case readers are asked to refer to an appendix 'for a translation' of a questionnaire originally in Chinese (p. 63). One might say, provocatively, that if, as Williams (1983: 87) said, 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language', how can we ignore the questions of translation when dealing with research on cultures of learning and intercultural learning?

*Researching Intercultural Learning. Investigations in Language and Education* is similar to the companion volume in a number of ways. The editors' introduction proposes (p.2) an

insightful three level categorisation of intercultural learning. The first is where culture is 'out there' and involves learning about other cultures, which in turn stimulates reflection on one's own culture and identities. The second focuses on 'competencies and skills of interpreting', where the emphasis is on entering the interpretative frameworks of others. Isaiah Berlin, citing Vico, refers to this as 'entrare' (literally: 'enter'), whereby 'the members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand (...) the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remoter in time or space' (1998: 9). The theorists whom Jin and Cortazzi cite propose that such insight can be promoted by the pedagogical pursuit of competences. The third category, in Jin and Cortazzi's analysis, is intercultural learning as 'a cultural process' and it is here that their notion of 'culture of learning' re-enters the frame.

In fact many of the chapters in this book refer to 'culture of learning' and could as easily have been included in the other book. Only a few chapters would fit into the first two levels of the categorisation if the editors had chosen to follow through with this framework in their presentation of the chapters by section. In fact there is no further reference to this in the overview they provide of the chapters. It is only in the 'Postscript' that they pick it up again indirectly and suggest an agenda for further research. The titles of sections used in the two books, which might be an aid to navigation through them, thus turn out to be of little help. Readers using these books as an entry point into the field will have to make their selection with the help of titles, the summaries the editors provide and the indexes.

As in the first book, most of the chapters in *Researching Intercultural Learning* are based on empirical research, but not all. The first is a survey article of work on 'Cultures of learning and writing in the US academy' and would have been a good initial chapter to the volume if it had had a wider scope. For the question of writing as a central element of international students' interactions with academics and their expectations – sometimes adaptation but sometimes much more complex processes – occurs in a good number of the chapters either centrally or as part of an investigation with a wider scope. Nearly all the chapters in fact deal with Higher Education and often with aspects of language learning, including learning the spoken and written discourses expected of them by their teachers. That these issues are however not only a matter for international students but also for 'non-traditional students' – those who enter a university from a different trajectory and with different qualifications from the usual and 'normal' – is evident from a chapter with the provocative title ' "Discuss, Analyse, Define ..." Non-traditional students come to terms with cultures of learning in the UK'. That their experience might be similar to that of international students seems to be one of the aims of the project from which this chapter is taken, since they also have data on Chinese students in the UK. This aspect is unfortunately not reported in the chapter, but opens a new perspective on 'cultures of learning' and 'intercultural learning' which deserves to be followed up by other researchers.

Another challenge to the tendency in these books as elsewhere to focus on an 'East' versus 'West' distinction comes from a chapter on 'Teaching German in Eastern Europe and China'. On the one hand the authors say that Eastern Europe, formerly under Soviet Russian

influence, is similar to China because it too was influenced by Soviet education theory. On the other hand, they also find differences between these two entities and within one of them, Eastern Europe: 'we find an East-West divide (Poland-Russia) and also a North-South divide (Baltic States-Balkan states)'. China on the other hand is assumed to be monolithic, a view which needs to be questioned. A similar assumption about 'Western' learners also needs to be questioned as indeed it is in another chapter dealing with teaching German to non-traditional students. This chapter, together with one on Chinese students learning French and British students learning Chinese, is included, the editors say, as a counter-balance to the common emphasis in research – and in these two books – on the international uses of English (p. 11). The study in France nonetheless concludes that there are many similarities to Chinese students learning English and that 'there is less distance between French and English teaching cultures than between Chinese teaching culture and occidental norms in language education' (p.201). In so far as the authors compare cultures of language teaching in the francophone and anglophone worlds, they may be right, but in other spheres of education, there are significant differences between anglophone and francophone, starting in the primary school (Broadfoot, 1993).

The inclusion of other languages again raises the question of language of data collection and translation. The teachers of German in Eastern Europe perceive the universities there as a form of *Verschulung*, which the authors feel they have to translate with the neologism 'schoolification'. They then describe this as 'dumbing down or infantilization of the European Higher Education system by making it more like school', but with 'dumbing down' they bring in, for me, the wrong associations of ideas, and the translation and explanation are misleading. This is simply one example but it is symptomatic of the hidden, unrecognised problems of 'researching multilingually' (cf. [researchingmultilingually.com](http://researchingmultilingually.com)). There are often key words which cannot be fully translated, even with the help of a comment, and a better solution is to keep the original term so that readers are constantly reminded that they are dealing with concepts which are integral to the reality they are attempting to *entrare*. Readers will realise that this is an issue I have an interest in and betrays my personal reading of the chapters of both books.

In the same vein, I must ask myself if my selection of chapters, which I critique and have noted for possible use in my teaching, is determined by my 'culture of research'. For, if I were to recommend some chapters over others in either book, it would be because of the thoroughness of their methodology, their explicit account of analysis processes and their precision in tying interpretations of data to the data themselves. And there are a number of such chapters in *Researching Intercultural Learning*, including 'Inter-perspective pedagogy: rethinking culture and learning in multicultural higher education in the United Kingdom' or '“It's totally different”: undergraduate Chinese students learning to write in a New Zealand university' or 'Researching intercultural communication in a UK Higher Education context'. What marks these out particularly is that they do not ritualistically review the literature but introduce an analytical scope to their discussions which make their empirical work not simply significant in itself but part of a deeper reflection on the phenomenon of 'intercultural learning'. I can also envisage using a chapter on 'Supporting intercultural learning: for

beginners' Chinese learning at the Open University, UK' which, despite the odd syntax of the title – perhaps a misplaced colon – is one of the few chapters which deals with the second of the editors' categories, 'intercultural competencies', and does so in a pedagogically imaginative way, researched thoroughly and persuasively.

Finally I come to the books as product. Editors and authors put much time and effort into such books and it is a pity that there are uncorrected errors such as 'However grand that ambition that (sic) may be, (...)'*(Researching Cultures of Learning p. 267)* and, more annoyingly for the reader, signs of poor copy-editing, such as 'In this chapter, we will focus on English language teacher identity, which is deemed a crucial role to foster the learners' identity' (ibid. p. 249) which I found difficult to process because of the unusual use of 'role'. It must also be annoying for editors to see on page 262 of *Researching Intercultural Learning* two different font sizes used.

In summary, there is much to recommend in these books since there are chapters of high quality in their own right. There are also weaknesses, above all in their composition, for they do not fulfil the editors' well articulated and important purposes as well as they might. There is still much research – both conceptual critique and empirical-based challenge - to do on 'cultures of learning' and 'intercultural learning'.

## References

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