

# FALLING INTO CULTURIST TRAP: PRACTICE OF OTHERING IN AN INDONESIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

*Arini Nurul Hidayati*

Prodi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris  
Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Siliwangi Tasikmalaya  
Jalan Siliwangi No. 24 Tasikmalaya  
Email: arini.n.hidayati@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates my own teaching experience perceiving Kartini, my 'Central Java' student, who has different background of culture in the class. How i noticed her is part of impact on how my English teachers in Central Java used to notice me. This is due to a belief that the capability of teachers to 'overlook the significance of their past experience' is one of the elements in shaping their present and future attitude in teaching and learning (Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995). Therefore, a narrative analysis which investigates nonnarrative data through narration (Bamberg, 2012; Benson, 2014) is presented to illustrate the concept of the major hindrance in communication in the way of overgeneralizing, stereotyping, and reducing the students with something different or less than they are under the four constituents; stereotype, prejudice, culturalism, and essentialism (Halliday et al., 2010). The data inform that I once viewed my student in terms of difference from myself. Thus, I was misled by my own preconceptions and have fallen into the trap of othering.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, othering, stereotype, prejudice, culturalism, essentialism, narrative analysis

## ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini menggambarkan pengalaman pribadi saya pada saat mengajar salah seorang mahasiswa yang berasal dari Jawa Tengah, sebut saja namanya Kartini. Cara saya memperlakukan Kartini tidak lepas dari pengalaman terdahulu dengan dosen-dosen saya sewaktu menempuh studi master di Jawa Tengah. Hal ini karena sebuah pemahaman mengenai kemampuan seorang guru dalam mengambil nilai yang bermakna dari masa lalunya merupakan bagian dari proses pembentukan sikapnya di masa kini dan masa mendatang, khususnya dalam hal pengajaran (Jalongo dan Isenberg, 1995). Oleh karenanya, analisis naratif yang bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi data non-naratif melalui narasi (Bamberg, 2012; Benson, 2014) pun dilakukan sebagai upaya untuk memberikan gambaran mengenai hambatan utama dalam komunikasi, terutama yang berkaitan dengan overgeneralisasi, stereotip, dan menilai mahasiswa dengan sesuatu yang berbeda dari apa yang seharusnya. Penilaian ini berdasarkan empat kategori; stereotipe, prasangka, kulturalisme, dan esensialisme (Halliday et al., 2010). Data dari penelitian ini menginformasikan bahwa saya ternyata telah menilai mahasiswa saya dengan sudut pandang yang berbeda. Dengan kata lain, hal ini menunjukkan bahwa saya telah terkecoh oleh praduga saya dan terjatuh dalam jebakan othering.*

**Keywords:** komunikasi lintas budaya, othering, stereotipe, prasangka, kulturalisme, esensialisme, analisis naratif

## INTRODUCTION

This is a story on my own teaching experience in the university where I have been working. I always believe that every student is special, therefore, I have to concern with their distinguished uniqueness. Specific treatments I applied due to some particular necessities I found during the process of teaching. Nevertheless, following this structured pattern, I once ever trapped in the notion of othering in which the different facets, the variety of possible characteristics and the full complexity of my students are ignored in favour of a preferred definition (Halliday et al., 2010: 25). This condition unwittingly brought me into being an essentialist, presuming that there is a universal essence, homogeneity, and unity in a particular culture of my students (Halliday et al., 2010: 1).

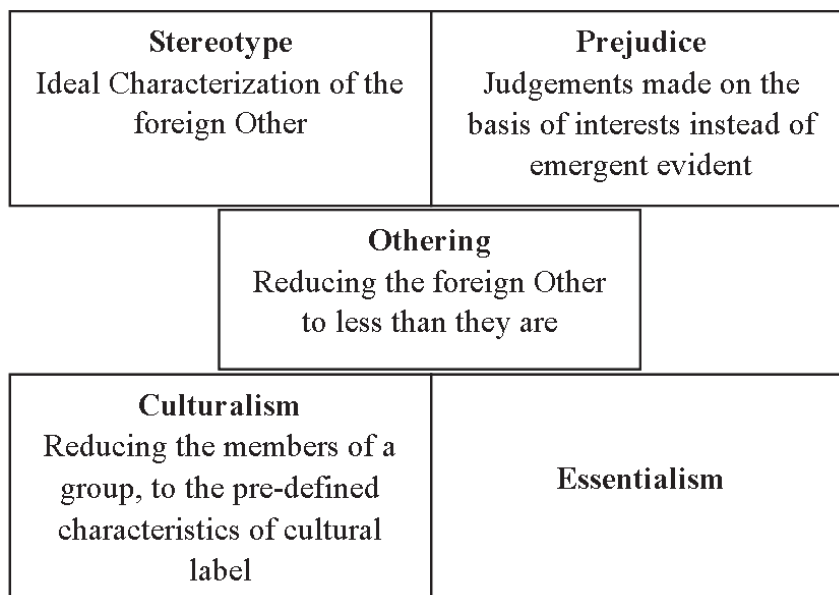
Views of essentialism were born as the result of reification, imagining something to be real when it is not (Halliday et al., 2010). It often happened to me long before I recognized further understanding on how it should be to conduct communication with the students I considered as ‘foreign Others’. However, an uncontrolled situation still also occurred even after gaining such understanding about that notion. For instance, when I had a student from Central Java, which particularly had a very different English accent and speed, physically possessed darker skin, slow motion, and easy to concede to her friends, I took a conclusion that she is a ‘real’ Javanese woman as I acknowledged from many representations in mass media, such as in film *Surat Cinta untuk Kartini* (2016) starred by Indonesian actress, Dian Sastrowardoyo. Hence, I sometimes ‘over’ treated this student specially in order to show how I cared and understood her position as a ‘foreign other’ among my Sundanese students. I thought it was very helpful for her until she told me that she was ashamed and inconfident when I acted that way. On the other hand, she said she was unsafe and uncomfortable joining my class.

The unpredictable and horrifying reaction expressed by my Central Java student had led me into a very deep contemplation. I was thinking aloud, checking, and rechecking my understanding about the teaching principle I believed this far, discussing with my colleagues, and finally confirming the fact with some theories and concepts from experts. Then, I came into conclusion that I already got trapped in othering. I made a false preconception on how to understand my student by stereotyping her as a ‘Javanese’ woman, prejudicing her with some ‘untrue’ judgements of being ‘herself’.

A literature study discussing about the notion of othering has been conducted by Linares (2016). She mentions some pivotal issues by proposing four pedagogical tools that could promote critical cultural awareness raising in the language classroom. It initially presents some theoretical contributions on the concepts of the “other” and the “self” and its dialectical relation. To fill a practical void in order to support the the key ideas of this article, I investigate a similar issue from different insight, a real story about othering from teaching experience.

Since my research context is at a language classroom which is ‘culturally sensitive place to learn’ (Porto, 2010: 47), to open chances for positively transforming individuals’ thinking and actions, I started to illustrate how I specifically went with them. These language-teaching arenas reflect both the teachers and students’ values, meanings, and behaviors (Byram & Guilherme, 2000); therefore, it becomes very essential for the teachers to consider cultural complexity and multiplicity of their students, so that they face a different social identity while questioning their own. This is one possible way to break down their barriers of incomprehension, ignorance, and alienation that take them to misleading pictures of the other. Besides, “classroom not only as a window to the world but also as a space that provides opportunities for human growth” (Dasli, 2011: 15), where encounters with othering come to be openings to influence both negative and preconceived attitudes and ideologies.

My concept of othering in this case is totally influenced by Halliday et.al (2010) in which he distributes four constituents of othering; (1) stereotyping which not only refers to nationalities, but to any group of people which is perceived as different (ethnicity, tribes, religion, political alignment, class or caste), (2) prejudice which accentuates to the interest-based judgements (ethnicity, tribes, religion, political alignment, class or caste, or gender) instead of emergent evident (what can be learned on the basis of deeper understanding), (3) culturalism which emphasizes the greater significance of ‘culture’ than the ‘people’ themselves, (4) essentialism, pre-defining what people are like, therefore, there is a reification/imagination of ‘culture’ as objects, places, physical entities within which and by which people live (Dasli, 2011: 26). Please look at the following Bubbles to see how they correlate each other:



**Figure 1. Defining Concept of Othering (Halliday et al., 2010:25)**

## RESEARCH METHOD

This article reports on one part of a larger qualitative study examining a small part of my own experience during teaching EFL for approximately eight years. At the time of this study, I was teaching methodology in English Language. Teaching where I met my respondent, Kartini (pseudoname), a fifth semester female student of English Education Department from Banyumas, Central Java, Indonesia, whom I naturally consider to be calm, dilligent, literally ‘weak’, slow motion, and very strong local-accentual. Getting very intensive with the development of teaching strategies, I was eager to practice appropriate principles due to particular circumstance occured at the class as following the ‘parameters of particularity’ in postmethod pedagogy proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2008). Moreover, I saw my positionality as juxtaposed to that of the student I took as respondent in this study in that her experiences were intricately interwoven with my own experiences as an English language learner. During the data collection period, I utilized autobiographical narratives (structured) and individual interviews (unstructured) as main data sources in understanding the pattern of my own experience and my student’s.

I started to analyze the data before the end of data collection, which is relevant with the guidance for conducting qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). First, I displayed the data analysis throughout after data collection was accomplished. Second, I created a table displaying the participant’s demographic information. Next, I segregated the data by important

categories and themes in relation to my past (Looking Back), present (Reflecting on my student's experience), and future (Thinking Forward) life history trajectories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938/ 1963 in Schmidt, 2010). Then, I further analyzed my own auto narratives by finding emerging themes connecting to the constituents of othering (stereotype, prejudice, culturalism, and essentialism). The process was concluded with an in-depth analysis of the student's interview transcript. Specifically, the approach applied to display the data was using a narrative analysis which investigates nonnarrative data through narration (Bamberg, 2012).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I have shared two months teaching and learning experience with Kartini. Everything seemed to be normal until a clumsy situation happened once she privately invited me to converse. From such a quite short talk, I concluded that she was being very annoyed by my attitude during teaching Methodology in ELT class due to my special treatment on her as the only Central Javanese student in that class. It was very shocking and thundering to me, because what I felt to be true was actually not for others.

To give an obvious picture about the predicament situation occurred between Kartini and me, this following table will give you a comparative overview:

**Table 1 Cultural Traps due to Incorrectness of Preconception**

<i>I think I am being understanding and inclusive because</i>	<i>Kartini feels patronized, othered, and victim of racism because</i>
a. I showed I understand Kartini's cultural circumstance and special needs.	She does not want to be made 'special' by someone who could not possibly understand, notably her teacher. She has no rights to presume that she has special needs. I was treating her as inferior to others because of a limited understanding of who she 'really' is. She feels invaded.
b. I rationalized her shortcomings in terms of culture.	I made her a special cultural case. I implied the inferiority of her culture. I failed to imagine that she could be like my other students.
c. I tried to imitate her localized English accent to show my involvement in her 'context'.	Long before I met her as a Javanese living in Sunda, I already assumed that she will have difficulty adapting, therefore, I treated her as though she is handicapped.
d. I showed great interests in her culture.	I overemphasized 'exotic' aspects which implied backwardness, and thus, her inferiority.

### 1 Looking Back

I remember the times when I pursued my master degree in Solo, Central Java, Indonesia, as one of memorable stories and unforgettable memories with my English teachers. Getting involved in Javanese major community, as a Sundanese, I sometimes found it difficult to begin. However, my handicaps were no more burdens since my teachers were really warm and helpful. Besides, some of them sometimes treated me with privilege as I was culturally one of the minor 'species' in the class. These specialties kept me encouraging and comfortable. The peak was when my thesis supervisor oftentimes gave some jokes in English using my local-accent during supervision and showed his great interests in knowing further about many things related to the place where I belong to. He asked several questions regarding to the 'unique accent' I uttered, local traditions, fine arts, and the people. Until, one day, he put on a note in my thesis,

### **Excerpt #1**

“Finish the revision soon, then, you may go home.” (14/04/12)

I could not believe that my teacher cared a lot about my ‘home’ even though he always made a fallacious definition about where I am exactly from. Almost all my teachers defined Tasikmalaya, my home, as a small part of Bandung, the capital city of West Java, in fact, they have a quite far distance. On the other words, Tasikmalaya is juxtaposed to Bandung as they are both located in West Java. Moreover, he sometimes gave me Central Java traditional foods to introduce me into his culture which means he considered me as a foreign other. I perpetuated this moment into my facebook wall status,

### **Excerpt #2**

“Such a gorgeous lecturer, serving the students with extraordinary meals. ‘Wait and see, I will do pay for these.’” (22/04/12)

The comfort I felt during being a student in a strange place has been diminished by the warmth served by my teachers, especially when they gave special treatments on my diversity as a Sundanese, I feel my local pride was heightened.

Anchored the convenient learning atmosphere I experienced with my English teachers in Central Java, I initiated to apply such strategies in my classes, notably in Methodology in ELT class, where I am supposed to teach my students teaching principles and strategies. Moreover, there was one student coming from Central Java which I can be likely take as an instance.

First meeting was running smoothly as we only shared information about the lesson planning for a semester. I also felt so enthusiastic since I could see many students with different background, and what made me more energetic was because of the ‘unique’ Central Javanese student.

### **Excerpt #3**

Another happiness came from a student who is originally from Banyumas. She spoke English with her strong local-accentual pronunciation. It was real fun somehow, I could experience different classroom circumstance due to the various students from various regions since this university turned into state university. This is like a ‘dejavu’ in a contrast way. I am happy that I could treat her different from others, I will make her special. (16/08/17)

Following the principle of desugestopedia in Freeman (2003: 79), “if the students trust and respect the teacher’s authority, they will accept and retain information better”, I construed that building students’ trust will positively bring them into better understanding. Also, she contends that “the fine arts (music, art, and drama) enable suggestions to reach the subconsciousness. The arts should, therefore, be integrated as much as possible into the teaching process.

### **Excerpt #4**

...yet, it might be hard for this student (Kartini) to adapt with Sundanese, as what I experienced seven years ago when getting involved with Javanese. Therefore, I tried to open access for her culture to be present in the class by several ways. To reduce the boredom, I played jokes with Kartini, trying to imitate uttering English using her local-accent. I also triggered Kartini to talk by and tell the story about Ngapak\*, her local accent well-known among Indonesian. Today is really enjoyable because everyone shared a lot of laughters because of that. (23/08/17)



Bringing bright and colorful learning circumstance is believed to activate ‘paraconscious’ part of the mind to break the psychological barriers of the learners (Freeman, 2003). By doing so, I did expected to visit Kartini’s deepest heart, so that, she will feel homy. These conditions were sustained until the fifth meeting. I considered Kartini as a special entity in my class. She became very popular among her friends.

### Excerpt #5

I am very happy that all students were enjoying the meeting. Today, they participated with a full engagement. They are also able to respect one another, accept the difference in between, and cooperate well during the discussion session. None of them stayed silent, everyone contributed, especially in poster presentation session. They moved from one spot to another, raised many questions, and interacted enthusiastically. (30/08/2017)

Considering the fact that all of my students showed such positive behavioral engagement which encompassed their ‘efforts, persistences, participation, and compliance’ with the given activities during in-class activity (Davis, 2012), I concluded that I have been successful in dealing with any circumstances in my teaching milieu, notably in relation to the students’ sociocultural difference. Thus, I assumed that my ‘special treatment’ to Kartini also worked on making her engaged in learning activities.

## 2. Reflecting on Kartini’s experience

In another view point, regarding to Kartini’s experience, there was a vice versa situation occurred. The ‘image’ I create to illustrate ‘other’ could possibly be failed or mistaken depending on how my interlocutor responses to my stimulus. The following interview transcript indicates how she was in a contrary.

### E-Interview #1

---

Me : After our last short talk, I really want you to be honest. What do you feel when I started to converse with you using your typical local-accent in class? Do not hesitate to answer, I will be alright.

---

K : I feel anxious and offended when you seemed to exploit my culture as a commodity of jokes. I thought it was inappropriate to happen in the class. I am worried that it will furthestmost impact on my learning motivation in the classroom. Besides, I also feel shy because all my friends will stare at me.

---

**Taken on October 1, 2017 via whatsapp**

Kartini expressed her feeling of being an unexpected person in my juxtaposition. It reveals that she saw the teacher’s behavior was rather ‘derogatory’ since the displayed culture in form of accent has been all packaged in the same stereotypical personality (Halliday et al., 2010:10). Hence, if a Javanese has ‘very strong local-accentual’, she is presumed not to be able to fluently and accurately articulate the English sentence(s). This totally proved how I justiced Kartini based on ‘prejudice’ (Halliday et al., 2010). Moreover, the inappropriacy of cultural presence she assumed was considered as a betrayal on the postmethod pedagogy parameter in term of ‘possibility’ in which the student’s ‘ideology and identity’ were not identified once the teacher decided to do particular acts or talks (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). As a result, the student was showing anxiety and reducing her safety and comfort during the class which might also impact on her desire and willingness to study or being demotivated (see Dornyei et al., 1998).

Getting aware then feeling guilty was encouraging me into other sharp questions prevailing onto some deeper informations. This purposes to initiate an opening talk of apologizing to what had happened in the class. Also, it was conducted to open access on her forgiveness,

### E-Interview #2

---

Me	: So, you think that I consider you as an ‘alien’?
K	: Yes, sometimes. Hehe...
Me	: <i>Duh*</i> , Really, I didn’t mean to do that (silent for five seconds).
K	: It’s OK, mam.
	(silent for five seconds)
Me	: Mmm, then, how do you actually feel whenever I did that?
K	: Whenever I feel like an ‘alien’ in the class, I really want to escape, suddenly dissappear and arrive in somewhere else. Besides, I also become homesick everytime you asked or talked about Banyumas, my hometown, or other cities nearby. If I could move from here, I would do that.

---

**Taken on October 1, 2017**

This excerpt informs how she felt so rigid in such ‘artificial’ communication happening at class whenever her ‘cultural’ topics appeared in the class. I was being very ‘essentialist’ as I had done a reification/imagination of her ‘culture’ as objects, places, physical entities within which and by which she lived (Halliday et al., 2010:26). Again, she lost her safety in learning at the same time. The way she thinks of the language she is learning was changing since she thought that her teacher did not give any extra spaces for her to ‘breath’ as herself not only as a Javanese student.

Trying to understand her situation, I was in charge of looking at any possibilities I can do to come closer on the solutions we might figure out regarding to the matter we faced. Eliciting her true condition living in a difficult place was working for some extent,

### E-interview #3

---

Me	: Are you difficult to adapt learning in a new place?
K	: Yes. I am deadly doing extra efforts to sustain in the place in which none I acknowledged.
Me	: Then, how did you escape from such difficult situations?
K	: I was looking for friends who have similar cultural backgrounds, because I think they will be more understanding.

---

**Taken on October 2, 2017 via whatsapp**

Here, she began to open the fact on the admission that she also considered Sundanese as foreign “Others”. She was an essentialist as well since she did a ‘reification/imagination’ on how Sundanese friends might not have better understanding on her compared to Javanese friends (Halliday et al., 2010).

### 3. Thinking Forward

Learning from the previous stories happened to me and one of my students, there must be agents of change which suggest refreshments on the thought and heart. Both the teacher, I, and the student have to be sincerely accepting the weaknesses of one another. On the other words, for the better future teaching circumstance, they are required to be open-minded instead of being blamethrowers.

## E-Interview #4

---

Me	: Well, Kartini. I now really need a suggestion from you about what to do next regarding to this situation?
K	: Mmm... Excuse me, mam? Could you explain again the question?
Me	: Mmm... I mean what do you wish for the next meetings?
K	: Owh, I see. I wish you can give me support and motivation not by raising issues about my origins in class but rather by noticing me as the other students, like you noticed my Sundanese friends, no difference.

---

**Taken on October 2, 2017 via whatsapp**

A new day has finally come. She revealed her future prospect and hope when learning with me which means that she still has motivation to join the class, a very happy news to me indeed. It is definitely with requirements of avoiding being essentialist with stereotyped and prejudiced-based communication (Halliday et al., 2010). The steps I have taken furthermore confirmed the postmethod belief that a balanced approach would also seek to establish dialogue ‘between the barriers that inhibit change and the factors that help overcome that barriers’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2008:215).

## CONCLUSION

Definition and limitation of othering have been discussed in many articles or papers. Nevertheless, in fact, there are still conditions leading English language teacher into its culturist trap regarding to the existing students with different cultural background. This is, somehow, for particular circumstance, because of the unawareness of the influenced environment within which they are communicating. Moreover, the ignorance of their own preoccupation in order to understand what it is that students from other backgrounds are responding to was another certain erroneous. Therefore, as English teachers, it is surely essential to monitor the language and be aware of the destructive, culturist discourses we might be conforming to or perpetuating.

It is also concluded that open-minded communication is an access into better understanding no matter what cultural backgrounds underlie beneath. If teachers want to have a good communication with their students, they should avoid their classroom discourses from stereotype, prejudices, culturalism and essentialism. This paper focuses only on what had happened in an ‘Othering’ English classroom, therefore, it is good to discuss another paper on how ‘Othering’ constitutes in students and teacher’s learning experience due to metacognitive perspective.

## REFERENCES

- Bamberg, M. 2012. Narrative Analysis. *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*, 2, 77-94.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. 2003. *Data Analysis and Interpretation. Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, 4.
- Byram, M., & Guilherme, M. 2000. Human Rights, Cultures, and Language Teaching. In A. Osler (Ed.), *Citizenship and Democracy in Schools: Diversity, Identity, Equality* (pp. 63-78). Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. 2000. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*.
- Dasli, M. 2011. Reviving the ‘Moments’: From Cultural Awareness and Cross-cultural Mediation to Critical Intercultural Language Pedagogy. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19



(1), 21-39.

- Dörnyei, Z. 1998. Demotivation in Foreign Language Learning. In TESOL'98 Congress, Seattle, WA, March.
- Freeman, Diane Larsen. 2003. Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching. Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, et.al, A., Hyde, M., & Kullman, J. 2010. Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book for Students. Routledge.
- Jalongo, M. R., Isenberg, J. P., & Gerbracht, G. 1995. Teachers' Stories: From Personal Narrative to Professional Insight. The Jossey-Bass Education Series. Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. 2008. Understanding Language Teaching: from Method to Postmethod. Taylor and Francis e-Library.
- Porto, M. 2010. Culturally Responsive L2 Education: An Awareness-Raising Proposal. *ELT Journal*, 64 (1), 45-53.
- Schmidt, M. 2010. Learning from Teaching Experience: Dewey's Theory and Preservice Teachers' Learning. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 58 (2), 131-146.