

## **Unresolved tensions, hard realities and conflicting agendas: a review of the BAAL/Routledge Applied Linguistics workshop**

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# Unresolved tensions, hard realities and conflicting agendas: a review of the BAAL/Routledge Applied Linguistics workshop

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**Key words:** BAAL, conference, Routledge Applied Linguistics Workshop

Conference review of the BAAL/Routledge Applied Linguistics workshop held on 16 September 2016 at Manchester Metropolitan University focused on the theme of 'mismatched and destabilised epistemologies and ontologies'.

The BAAL/Routledge Applied Linguistics workshop held on 16 September 2016 at Manchester Metropolitan University focused on the theme of 'mismatched and destabilised epistemologies and ontologies' throughout the day, but perhaps not always in quite the way the organisers had envisioned. Rather than explicitly investigate, explore and identify contrasting epistemologies and ontologies, these differences were apparent through the various frameworks that presenters used in their papers which focused on international students, English language assessment and, more broadly, UK HE. What transpired was that both the reality and construct of the international student served as a crucible where various interpretations and agendas met, clashed and, perhaps too often, passed each other by.

Although the organisers (Khawla Badwan and Lou Harvey) did an excellent job in attempting to focus the discussion, there appeared to be several notable and crucial unresolved tensions throughout the proceedings. The morning session was dedicated to the theme of 'International students negotiating intercultural discourses' and began with Professor Adrian Holliday drawing on his notions of cultural threads versus cultural blocks

and his 'grammar of culture' (see Holliday 2016). This represented a very promising and nuanced start and was followed by four papers which were loosely held together by the morning's first theme. These papers reflected both different contexts and approaches to understanding and/or working with international students from problematising the label of the international student (Collins), to global citizenship (Leslie), superdiversity (Jablonkai and Du) and employability skills (Herrero). However, as one of the participants noted, while the conference began with a critical and nuanced approach from Holliday, it was then followed by participants frequently invoking categories such as the 'international student' in ways that at times may have lacked a degree of criticality. This is in part due to the inescapability of the label international student where it has become naturalised within the discourse and vested interests of UK HE, particularly in connection with student recruitment and the reliance on higher fees for students who are classified as international. Moreover, behind the label of international student also rest some of the 'hard realities' which these students face during their study in the UK including the increasingly difficult processes for obtaining visas (see Travis and Weale 2016).

Another of these hard realities which international students face is the need to take a UKVI recognised secure English language test (SELT) most often in the form of an IELTS to meet an English language requirement prior to gaining entry onto a degree programme and this was recognised in the second theme of the workshop (language assessment and international student recruitment). These four papers were the most cohesive in terms of their relevance to the session's theme and they included the tensions between the use of pre-sessionals versus the overreliance on IELTS (Bentley), the predictive validity of IELTS (Drybrough), the need to rethink entry requirements and assessment for PG programmes (Ottewell) and expectations of language needs from students on a Master's level TESOL programme (Moran). In this session there was a palpable sense of agreement amongst the 80 participants that IELTS is not entirely fit for purpose, but that IELTS was also not

necessarily designed as predictive assessment of a student's capability to succeed on a degree programme.

The discussant Vincenzo Raimo concluded the second session in polemical fashion stating that those working in HE as applied linguists and EAP practitioners had, in his words, 'failed.' While this assessment certainly captured the attention of the audience, he was unclear in his criticism about what exactly the failure was. Was the failure a reference to the decline in the popularity of language study in UK HE, the lack of influence which practitioners exert over language policy rules and regulations at governmental and HE levels, or perhaps even the lack of influence over the recent Brexit vote? Certainly, these are areas which need further clarification, consideration and debate. However, without clear identification of the problems, it remains difficult to seek solutions or to have a productive discussion. To add to this, Raimo also stated that continued failure will see language provision in UK HEIs taken over by private language providers. Given that this is a growing trend (see Chakraborty: 2016), this threat carried some weight and after the conclusion of Raimo's assessment, the participants in the workshop continued with the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.

The afternoon session focused on the day's final theme (the International Student Experience) and again there was a significant degree of coherence in the 5 afternoon papers. However, where discontinuity was somewhat apparent was in relation to the morning statement by Holliday regarding his decision to not ask or state where research participants are from, instead leaving this to the research participants to make reference to if they felt it was important. This cautiousness against imposing a national or ethnic identity on research participants contrasted with the series of afternoon papers which dealt with the ISE from the perspective of Arab students (Hajar), Russian students (Ryazanova) Thai students (Cleary) and Chinese students (Ni). While all papers were well-researched and had interesting findings, there is a danger that studies from the perspective of a particular nationality/ethnicity might imbue the category with greater significance than it may actually

warrant. This approach also raises questions about when these categories are appropriate and relevant particularly in light of Holliday's earlier distinctions between cultural blocks and threads. Where the afternoon session worked very well was when research students themselves (e.g. Candarli and González) talked about their own experiences in a way which reflected the cultural threads approach. While both researchers drew on their own nationality, their primary focus was on their transformation and integration into the group of fellow students and the small culture of their programme. This paper also felt less like a report of research done *on* a particular category of student and the kind of nuanced approach that the morning had promised (see Harvey 2016 for another example of a similarly nuanced approach).

It should be no great surprise that there were, in the words of the organisers, competing epistemologies and ontologies which emerged in an event such as this. However, the workshop may have served as a catalyst for starting to identify what exactly these mismatches are (possible examples include neoliberalism versus humanism, critical cosmopolitanism versus essentialism, postmodernism versus positivism and the many discourses in between these problematic binaries). This starting point can lead to further consideration of the implications for competing approaches to EAP, culture, interculturality and UK HE in general. While some of the workshop's participants may have left with a feeling that this process had barely begun and too many questions remained unanswered, fortunately, the promise of a second workshop in Leeds in 2017 offers hope that some of the issues raised on the day will be considered in the near future. Further information about this event will appear in the *Leeds Language Scholarship Journal*.

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