

# A Critique of Palfreyman's Othering: Strengths and Weaknesses in Research Methods

Torrin Shimono

## Introduction

Palfreyman (2005) investigates the phenomenon known as *othering* among administrators and teachers in an English language program at a medium-sized, private Turkish University. He defines *othering* as “the ways in which the discourse of a particular group defines others groups in opposition to itself” (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 213). This “Us-Them” stance involves maintaining social distance and making value judgments (often negative) based on stereotypes of the opposing group as a whole. *Other* distinctions are based not only national or ethnic culture, but also subgroups such as institutional culture, social class, and gender. Palfreyman argues that these socially constructed *representations* of *other* groups are strongly influential in determining decisions, roles, attitudes, approaches, and methodologies in TESOL contexts. In this study, the author seeks to provide concrete evidence illustrating the phenomenon of *othering*. Using data gathered from semi-structured interviews of 12 administrators (9 expatriates; 3 Turks) and 27 teachers (9 expatriates; 18 Turks), his findings focuses on the responses of two groups: (1) Curriculum administrators and their *other* and (2) Turkish teachers and their *other*. Palfreyman concludes that the present study illustrates how social and historical influences manifest in real educational settings and claims its relevance in broader TESOL contexts. He ultimately urges TESOL educators to take responsibility to understand *othering* in order to develop more productive and professional discourses with regard to *culture*.

## Research Problem, Purpose, and Questions

Over the last twenty years, Palfreyman points out that TESOL researchers have become increasingly interested in the *culture* of the student or teacher as it has been seen as a key factor in shaping people's ideas and decisions about roles, attitudes, and approaches in TESOL (Block & Cameron, 2002; Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Norton, 2000; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003;

Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). Hence, Palfreyman identifies from the literature a growing need to elaborate and define discourses on culture among TESOL educators. The author conducted his study from 1996 to 1999 in Turkey, a nation striving to Westernize after an economic boom in the 1980s. The effects of economic prosperity saw the creation of the “New Bourgeoisie” which allowed for a greater number of students to enter higher education from this demographic. Also during this time, many Turkish universities were striving to employ a new curriculum. The Turkish university in this study hired a group of predominately British administrators to oversee the implementation of an English program that highlighted independent study skills such as learner autonomy, self- and peer-editing of essays, and time management. In his observations, Palfreyman noticed patterns of *othering* in the discourses of administrators as well as teachers. Given this context, the researcher sought to shed light on the following research questions:

1. What patterns of *Othering* influence the TESOL professional’s everyday practice in different parts of the world?
  2. What social, cultural, and political processes underlie these discourses?
  3. How do these discourses influence TESOL curriculum design and methodology?
  4. How are they taken up or resisted by individuals and to what ends?
- (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 215)

### **Strengths of the Research Methods**

One strength of the author’s research method is that it is longitudinal. Palfreyman reported that he gathered interview data from 1996 to 1999. This four-year period allowed for an appropriate amount of time to investigate his research questions in great detail. Conducting interviews over a four-year span afforded the researcher to gather evidence that *othering* discourse occurred consistently over time. Thus, the researcher’s prolonged engagement to the study contributes to the depth of the study and enhances its credibility.

Another strength is that a semi-structured interview was an appropriate method for gathering data pertaining to *othering*. Because the researcher was interested in gathering rich data on the prevailing thoughts of administrators and teachers, such a method would provide the platform to “let the data ‘speak’”

(Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 191). Using a flexible interview schedule in a quiet, private environment also afforded the conditions conducive to interaction that would allow the interview to develop naturally in the exploration of sensitive issues.

Lastly, the researcher was systematic in his data collecting procedures. With prior consent of his interviewees, he taped recorded all of his interviews. This allowed for detailed transcriptions for a better, more reliable analysis of the data.

### **Weaknesses of the Research Methods**

A major weakness of Palfreyman's research methods is that he makes many assumptions that interject doubt and ambiguity in the study. In collecting data, his first assumption is that all the administrators and teachers he interviewed trust him. He states, "As far as I could tell, both groups perceived me as a sympathetic colleague familiar with both Western and Turkish culture, with no particular institutional agenda" (2005, p. 218). In interviews, some argue that there should be some social distance maintained between the interviewer and the interviewee because of the co-constructed nature of the event. While trust is also a necessary component of successful interviews, the researcher does not discuss his relationship with his interviewees in any detail to support his claim. As a result, there is no way of really knowing to what extent their relationship and other contextual factors influenced the data.

Another assumption he makes is all the Turkish interviewees had an "advanced level of competence" in English (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 218). Again, the author does not go into any detailed descriptions about their proficiency level of the participants or even what "advanced level of competence" means. Since all the interviews were conducted in English, the credibility of the data is jeopardized because the reader does not know to what extent the interviewees understood his questions. The reader is left doubting the author's subjective intuition about the interviewees' English level and the complete credibility of their responses.

The third assumption is that the people he interviewed were a "representative sample" of administrators and teachers (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 217). Due to the subjective nature of this selection, the reader is left with either taking his word, or wondering if the participants in the study were conveniently sampled to suit his purposes. Because Palfreyman was a fellow teacher at the university, he

could have easily “cherry-picked” teachers he knew would provide support for his study. Closely examining at the participants in the current study, the teachers he interviewed were all female Turks (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 233). Moreover, only two teacher perspectives were reported in the data section. The reader calls into question if Palfreyman is really providing a representative sample or that the data merely reflects the researcher’s handpicked sample.

Another weakness of the research method was in the data collection as the researcher asked leading interview questions. Even though the researcher claims that the interview was meant to “elicit and *explore* issues that seemed significant to the informants” (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 217; italics added) in reality, his questions targeted narrow responses - that is, ones that supported Palfreyman’s own research interest. For example, instead of drawing out evidence of *othering* discourse among administrators, he explicitly asks *othering* questions such as, “How does learner autonomy/independence in USE (name of the university in this study) compare with *other* contexts?” (Palfreyman, 2005, p. 233; italics added). Another example is he asks teachers to explain extreme ends of the student population by asking teachers to describe a “good student” and a “not-so-good” student instead of a more neutral statement like “Please describe your students.” This dichotomous and generalizing way to ask about students may cause respondents to artificially produce *othering* discourse.

Lastly, reporting the data in this study was an issue as a lot of information was apparently left out. First, all the excerpts cited in the study failed to include Palfreyman’s questions that led to the respondents’ answers. Additionally, his transcriptions of the interviews were not included in the appendix section. Palfreyman comments that his interviews “Accommodated informants digressions onto related topics” but fails to discuss any of those digressions (2005, p. 218). While the author commented that he also conducted long-term observations over the four-year period, no thick descriptions were reported in the study. Finally, while the author notes that much of the data gathered for this study was part of a larger study, he fails to reference it. The lack of transparency makes this study seem opaque and ultimately hinders its credibility and confirmability.

### **Critique of Findings and Conclusions**

While Palfreyman claims the study illustrates the pervasiveness of *Othering*

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as British administrators tend to *other* Turkish culture and female Turkish teachers tend to *other* newly rich male students, apparent data collection, sampling, and reporting issues leave the reader with many unanswered questions. Overall, the study's credibility might have been improved if the researcher mentioned the limitations he encountered. Also, field notes, personal memos, as well as a timeline of when the participants were interviewed would have been helpful to see changes in attitudes and *othering* discourse over time and ultimately lend credibility to the study. While I personally agree with him in his conclusion about the negative effects of *othering* discourse among TESOL practitioners and a call for a deeper understanding of other cultures, I think readers need to be cautious not to warrant too much from his findings.

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## Abstract

This paper takes a critical look at David Palfreyman's 2005 article published in *TESOL Quarterly* entitled, "Othering in an English language program." The purpose of this review will be to summarize Palfreyman's main argument. In addition, this review seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses of his qualitative research methods and critically examine the conclusion Palfreyman draws from his study. This paper seeks to raise awareness of the concept of *othering* so instructors can be more cognizant of it in their own context. Moreover, the author hopes to stimulate discussion on better ways research this concept of *othering* through qualitative methods.