

JALDA's Interview with Professor Adrian Holliday

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Adrian Holliday

Adrian Holliday is Professor of *Applied Linguistics & Intercultural Education* at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK where he directs PhD programs in Education and Applied Linguistics and has been the Head of The Graduate School between 2002 and 2017. Professor Holliday got his bachelors' degree in Sociology from London University. He began his career in English Language Education in Iran in the early 1970's at the British Council Centre in Tehran, and then managed a small British Council curriculum unit in Ahwaz. After completing his master's degree in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University, he set up educational projects in Syria and Egypt between 1980 and 1990, which provided the experience of the global politics of English and the ethnographic material that informed his PhD thesis at Lancaster University in 1991. Professor Holliday supervises PhD students in critical qualitative studies in the sociology and cultural politics of English language education and intercultural communication, where he has published widely including *Understanding Intercultural Communication: Negotiating a Grammar of Culture* (2nd Ed., 2018), *Intercultural Communication: An Advanced Resource Book for Students* (3rd Ed., 2016), *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research* (3rd Ed., 2016), *(En)countering Native Speakerism: Global Perspectives* (2015), *Intercultural Communication and Ideology* (2011) and *The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language* (2005). *JALDA* has hosted Professor Holliday in a scholarly conversation with **Dr. Bahram Behin**, who himself is a fanatic upholder of Holliday's thoughts in conducting courses in the socio-culture of English language teaching.

BB: ---- *Professor Adrian Holliday, thank you for accepting JALDA's invitation to take part in this Skype-based interview. Sorry for the technological inconvenience we have had in getting connected to you.*

AH: ---- That's ok. It might come across all of us.

BB: ---- *So if you let me I would like to go to the questions in order not to take too much of your time. As a matter of fact, I could say that there is much more culture awareness in our departments nowadays. It can have several reasons and this awareness leads to concepts such as cross-cultural communication, intercultural communication and so forth. I'm sure that we would be benefited from your comments in this regard, and we would be able to extend it to our students as well as our audience in the journal. The first question that occurs to me as a person who is near to this area is the concept of intercultural communication. I myself get puzzled. For instance sometimes I could not distinguish between let's say cross-cultural communication and intercultural communication. I was wondering whether there is a difference between them or not?*

AH: ---- *Personally, I don't know what the difference is. It is not something that I have worried about. There are people out there who do talk about this. I would even say that the discussion is out of date. I think it belongs to previous set of preoccupations which is quite positivistic in its view about culture. So this is not something that I would worry about at all. And if anyone asks me -- like you did-- I will just say I don't know.*

BB: ---- *I would like to rely on the word positivistic that you used in order to delve into the discussion a little bit more. Since I am familiar, to some extent, with your works, I know that you are not a positivist.*

AH: ---- *Yes I try not to be.*

BB: ---- *OK. So, if we approach the concept of intercultural communication from a none-positivistic perspective, how would you define that? I mean should we have a theory again for intercultural communication in the traditional sense of the word? Or should we invent or introduce something which is quite none-positivistic in orientation?*

AH: ---- *Well, I am myself in the process of developing a theory which is the none-positivistic picture of what I called 'the intercultural'. And the intercultural is something which is all around us all the time. I say that because I want to pull it away from the notion of separate nation-states. In a positivistic sense, we both live in nation-states. The nation-states are different through each other: We have different economies; we have different education systems; we have different political structures; we have been brought up in different ways. But we have to remember that these are political constructions; and we have to remember that you and I are just people and we can talk to each other, and we can find so much in common with each other and something which I think we would both agree with is the memories of going to primary school for the first time: Leaving our family,*

going into an institution and finding something very culturally strange. So I'm trying to save the concept of intercultural and take it back into our shared common experience. And that means if I travel to Iran or if you travel to Britain; and I did travel to Iran when I was 23 years old when I suffered a terrible culture shock. The biggest resource is to remember the cultural shock that you had when you first went to school. It is a little bit like language learning; we talk about communicative competence, and when you approach a new language, you have to understand that you already have a competence in another language which you can transfer. So this is how I have used 'the intercultural'. We all have intercultural resources which we can transfer to other places; otherwise, we wouldn't survive. So when I travel to Iran, I can make sense of what is going on. It might be unexpected, but given time, I can understand what's happening; I can work things out. It isn't an impossible task because we are just people. So this is what I'm trying to get to: To remove this attitude of culture to traveling between these solid separate blocks.

BB: ---- *Wonderful. That's amazing. Well, I am trying to prevent myself from getting emotional. When I listen to you, just as when I read your works, I get emotional. I should change my questions then because I have prepared quite different things. OK. When we talk about culture in the sense that you are providing us with, what should we do in our academic situations? I mean, our students mostly have been brought up according to those positivistic principles...*

AH: ---- As all of us have.

BB: ---- *Yes. I wonder what we should take into the classroom, for example. What should we do in this regard? Of course I know that you are inclined to take the issue more theoretically, but we are concerned with our classes and our students.*

AH: ---- Yes. I wrote about this quite recently. There is an article that just came out a couple of months ago in which I was talking about this issue. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity myself to have a group of students that I can do this with. I have a lot of PhD students who go to different places and work this out on a one-to-one basis in tutorials and so on, but not in the classroom situation. Well, I would try to bring a sociological perspective into this. I would first of all explain to the students that we have been brought up with ideas which might not be true because of the nature of the world that we've all grown up with, and to talk about that and to explore with them what I've just been talking about. Their intercultural experiences that they have already had around them, and through that exploration to see where that takes us, and if any of them have ever encountered foreigners, I would talk about that, too to explore what went on between them and how far. It is just too simplistic to think about Iranian culture versus some other culture. I mean, these

young people more than us are already communicating across the world. They have tremendous insights and abilities which we never had when we were their age. You know they are involved in the Internet, in social media, and therefore, it is releasing their experience of that.

BB: ---- *Thank you very much. As a matter of fact, I was thinking about the role of technology in this regard, and you mentioned that. Could we be more specific about it? What is your own opinion about the role of technology in this intercultural communication? Of course you talked about that, but I would like to have, if possible, some more elaboration.*

AH: ---- Well, I am not an expert in this area, but I believe that the computer-assisted technology provides opportunities for students to interact directly with the world outside even that coming through an Internet source, and that enables them to have direct engagements whereas in the past, you were sitting in your classroom, you come from the streets outside and you come from your family or whatever, and you are imaging the foreign but not engaged directly. So I guess it's some sort of balance between helping our students to feel what they are receiving through other resources, so advising our students on how to deal with what's already happening. So they have to tell us what they are experiencing and we have to talk about it.

BB: ---- *Thank you. Professor Holliday, talking about culture leads to a more general question in the sense that what are the limits of the culture we are talking about? Let me clarify myself...*

AH: ---- That's a very good way of putting it.

BB: ---- *Thank you. Of course I am quite a clumsy person in this regard. I am just a beginner and a student.*

AH: ---- So am I. I get confused about this every day.

BB: ---- *That's your humbleness. Now, talking about culture, today in some cases, when we go to especially English language teaching, we come across such concepts as ecology and ecological approach to language, and I remember, for example, an American author Van Lier in this regard. Of course I find some affinity between intercultural communication and concepts put forward by those scholars. Now, if you try to define the concept of culture and the limits of culture, what would you include within that?*

AH: ---- Just before I say that, I have some comments on what we were saying a few moments ago. My students- you know I have them as my PhD students at the

moment and there I have four students who come from Algeria. They put me to task every single time I meet them, and they make me reassess everything.

BB: ---- *I see.*

AH: ---- So even though I've been in this area for a long time, I'm still working it out and that connects. If you look at the several representations of this grammar of culture which I'm trying to develop and they shift around and they change, and something which I'm trying to do there is not to make it simple because it is complex. This goes right back to an experience I had in a conference perhaps ten years ago when a Chinese student walked up to me; I still remember exactly the moment when she said: "Can you please define culture?" And I suddenly said: "No. I refuse; it's too complex." It is so complex; it's very hard to pin down in any way at all. So that's one thing. But once we think about the complexity, there are so many different aspects of it, and when you say limitation, what I'm not suggesting is that we are all the same and that we can share everything. I mean I see you sitting there; I'm sitting here; you are a man probably about the same age as I or younger; we are both academics; we both work in universities; we have very similar experiences in our education to a certain extent; but some things will have been completely different, and there are certain things which I cannot understand about you so they are explained. For example, I have many colleagues who have never been to Iran. They have only heard about it. My Algerian students are fearful because they think it is a terrible place where everybody is so religious; you can't move. These students, I'm talking about are themselves very religious people. So things have to be explained. So if somebody comes to Iran and they look around, they will see all sorts of things which are not straight forward. So when we say limitations, there are important differences in terms of circumstances. It does not mean they can't communicate. So what we share is that we are both human beings who, when things are explained, can say, yes I understand. That's to a certain extent. So we can move together. Does that help a little bit?



BB: ---- *Yes. Thank you very much.*

AH: ---- *What I don't accept at all is that our cultural upbringings make us think in such completely different ways that we can't communicate. I think given that we are brought up in different circumstances, we do share hugely common ways of thinking about things and if we can get down to that we can communicate.*

BB: ---- *Professor Holliday, talking about communication and explaining ourselves to each other, then comes the question of the means of communication. I mean the language that we are going to use in communication. Most of us are in English departments, and I should say that culture is more found in English departments nowadays. It might be the result of the findings of people like you coming to us, and we use the English language. But sometimes, in Iran for example, you can find reactions against that saying which language is going to be used for intercultural communication? Well, we talk about English as lingua franca then; we say that we can use English to communicate with other people. But as I said, there are strong reactions against that, and it is not reactions from ordinary people. You could say that there are such approaches in linguistics departments as well. I myself was in Australia for some time in linguistics departments, where people were more concerned with the endangered languages and like that, and they would support the enhancement of native languages over there. I thought that such movements would bring about some cultural contrasts and cultural conflicts instead of helping intercultural communication. What should we do in this regard? I mean how should we solve this problem? In which language and by means of which language we are going to communicate with one another as language students and language teachers?*

AH: ---- *Well, I guess it will be totally pragmatic. It depends what is available and what you need to do what you want to do.*

BB: ---- *So, availability is the point.*

AH: ---- *OK. It's a matter of facts. I can see some of your students. It's a matter of facts that English is a very useful language for international communication, and it's also facts that there are other languages which are not succeeding and might be dying as a result of this. If you talk to academics or just ordinary people from somewhere like India, people, on a daily basis, deal with four or five languages all at the same time and they are super multilingual, and they can manage. I imagine that you are at least trying to ...*

BB: ---- *Yes, that's right.*

AH: ---- *I'm almost, more or less monolingual, which I'm not very proud of. But I think it's a matter of pragmatics. I think what we mustn't be led to believe by this*

positivistic view is that when we speak another language we lose our original identity. I'm very keen on this idea of 'linguaculture' which comes from my colleague, Karen Risager, who's at Western University of Denmark, who says that when you speak other languages, you carry the linguaculture of your previous languages into those languages. So when you speak English, you populate it with your own cultural identity. So this concept takes away a little bit of the danger. You're not losing anything by speaking another language. You're gaining another place where you can be yourself. I don't know if that helps.

BB:---- *Yes, thank you. I can raise some other questions in that regard. Just one more question if possible. Yes, I got the point. As a matter of fact, you are saying that speaking different languages will enlarge your world views. Am I right?*

AH: ---- It must do. It certainly enlarges your repertoire of how you can communicate.

BB: ---- *As I can understand, you say that what is available is the best means for communication, right? But sometimes there is power play and some other languages are undermined or marginalized to this power play. What is the suggestion in that regard? What should we do? I mean in an English department, for instance, where you come across some reactions against the means of education, what sort of justification should be used here in order to justify your behaviour?*

AH: ---- Perhaps you have to put English in its place. You have to treat it as a means of communication which is useful, but you must understand its politics. I think all English Language and Literature students need to know the nature of the politics of English in the world so that they know what they are dealing with. It's a bit like dealing with explosives; you need to know how dangerous they are. That's, I think, they need to have a good ground -- and I'm sure your students do -- in sociolinguistics, and in the politics of English as a world language. So they need to know what they are dealing with; that this is a dangerous powerful commodity. So it has to do with the awareness of the material that you are learning. It might be a silly comparison, but at the moment in Britain, there's a huge discussion about the use of plastic and I'm sure it's the same in Iran. It's about how dangerous this is. The problem is that in the early days when people were using plastic, they didn't know how dangerous it was. So it has gone out of hand. But I guess you could say that English is a world commodity which is dangerous, and students need to know about it so that they can work with that.

BB: ---- *OK, thank you very much. I don't want to take your time any more than what I have already done. So I would like you to have your final remarks if there are any?*

AH: ---- Well, I'm not sure what to say except that I think any discussion of language, of English and of culture has to be prepared to get to the bottom of what

these concepts actually mean rather than treating them superficially. I think our students are extremely bright and intelligent. They might not always realize that they are. So our job is to help them to find their own intelligence, and to show them that things might not be what they thought they were, but still not to give them the impression that they can easily get to the bottom of the things.

BB: ---- *Yes. I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation for this interview. We caused you a lot of trouble. Sorry about that. It was really nice to talk to you*

AH: ---- It's absolutely fine, and I would be very happy to do this again. I enjoyed this very much, and if any of your students want to come along and have a conversation, I would be very happy to do that.

Author Biography



Bahram Behin is Associate Professor of TESOL who received both his BA in English Language and Literature and his MA in English Language Teaching from Tabriz University. He continued his studies towards a PhD degree in Linguistics and Literature in the University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia. He has been a full-time academic member of English Department in Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University since he returned from Australia in 1997. He is the founding editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances (JALDA)*.
