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Cultures in an ESL Writing Class

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to examine the cultures in the teaching and learning of ESL writing in an intermediate ESL undergraduate writing class through a qualitative study. Three primary research questions motivate this study of cultures in an ESL writing class: (a) Was the writing instruction to prepare students to become active cultural producers, reproducers, or products? (b) Was the writing instructor aware of the close connection between language, culture, and thought? (c) Did the writing instruction highlight transmission, acquisition or both? The data of this study included field notes based on classroom observations and two student participants' written drafts for course assignments were collected throughout a whole quarter. In addition, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with the instructor to understand his specific goals for this class and four semi-structured interviews, including retrospective accounts and cued questions, with two Taiwanese sophomore students to understand their interpretations of the writing tasks and perceptions of the writing instruction. The results show that given this instructor's strong awareness of the connection between language, culture, and thought, he tried to foster a literacy community through pursuing collaborative course projects, guiding students not only to be knowledge consumers, but knowledge producers through critically interacting with texts. Hence, this writing instruction highlighted the importance of knowledge transmission and transformation in learning English writing.

Keywords: Critical literacy; ESL writing; English for academic purpose

1. Introduction

The old paradigm of ESL writing instruction, divorced from contexts and cultural diversity, adheres to the stimulus-response model, treating ESL students as cultural products, rather than active cultural agents. To transform ESL students from "outsiders" to "insiders" in American academic settings, ESL instruction tend to be reductive and formulaic in "colonizing" these students to reconstruct their thinking-- like Americans-- at the expense of their L1 culture and identity. However, with growing recognition of cultural diversity and subjectivity, the new paradigm of L2 (English as a second language in this paper) teaching and learning has problematized knowledge-transmission model. Instead, it emphasizes that knowledge should be socially constructed and that language learners play a critical role in their language learning process as active meaning-making agents. Although cultures are too implicit to be clearly displayed and analyzed, they do have a tremendous impact on learning and acquisition of L2 literacies due to the huge cultural diversity among ESL students. This paper aims to examine how an ESL writing instructor took care of the mismatch between the cultural ways of thinking derived from his ESL students' L1 (their native languages) and those from their L2 (English) through exploring the relationship between language, culture and thought.

Culture represents our "whole" (Geertz, 1973) lived experiences. Culture is dynamic, subjective, contextualized and subject to change. Human activities aim mostly to interpret and construct "webs" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) recursively. Humans are purposive agents and have reasons for their activities and can (re) produce necessary conditions to carry out activities. Thus, "...while an educated person is culturally produced... the educated person also culturally produces cultural forms" (Levison, et al., 1996, p. 14). That is, we own our agency in cultural (re)production related to our whole lived experience.

Language is an important cultural tool that mediates structure and offers humans opportunities to be knowledge (re) producers. Language constitutes the most important content and instrument of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 133, quoted in Casanave, 1993, p. 150). Language, culture, socialization, and learning are intimately interrelated. Whorf stated that the way a man interprets his world is programmed by the language he speaks; that is, one's mind registers and structures external reality only in accordance with the program. Therefore, the way one receives, interprets, and (re)constructs webs in one language can be different from the way he does in another language. This phenomenon is evident in cross-cultural studies on ESL writing (e.g., Cai, 1993; Kaplan, 1966; Li, 1996).

In general, many Western cultures encourage critical thinking as a cultural goal, but many Asian cultures honor conformity. As a result, to upgrade their writing, Asian students tend to habitually memorize and imitate classics and recommended good writing. In contrast, Western cultures value critical thinking as social practice (Atkinson, 1999). This can explain why many Asian students tend to struggle with their academic writing in English when learning to reconstruct and even transform their habitual ways of thinking and writing. Despite using English as a second or foreign language, can be a potential factor which influences

the writing performance of L2 students, Cadman (1997) states that the causes of ESL or EFL students' writing problems can be more their difficulties with critical reading than with English proficiency.

In the old paradigm of learning and teaching, cultures, the "whole", represented a static body of knowledge; hence, knowledge transmission was the dominant model for teaching and learning. Wolcott (1994) claims that cultures are not fixed, but "continually being (re) formed." (p. 1726) That is, knowledge and culture should be socially constructed and acquired, rather than simply transmitted. Yet, Spindlers (1991) proposes that culture is "not transmitted unless acquired, and it is difficult to imagine how culture can be acquired unless it is transmitted, either by calculated or uncalculated transmission" (p. 276; quoted in Wolcott, 1994, p. 1728). Thus, to achieve maximum language proficiency or "cultural capital", it is necessary to pursue both transmission and acquisition.

When hoping to learn the practice of ESL (English as a second language) writing, I chose to observe an intermediate ESL writing class taught by a fairly experienced instructor who had taught in Hong Kong for many years. He was very conscious about what the learning styles and strategies of his students, mostly Asians, were like. He assumed that this was his job to help them out, bridge the gap between students' writing ability and the expected target that they are supposed to achieve. Though this instructor worried that his student might use his writing models as the only models of the so-called good writing, he even more worried that these students were struggling with their reading and writing assignments. Novice ESL writers, without sufficient linguistic and cultural resources, often get stuck in their writing. "I have many ideas, but I don't know how to express them appropriately in English." This is a common expression among these students who have not acquired the language intuitive and, more importantly, the appropriateness of using this language, learning the culture that the language represents. For many students, taking such an English writing class for the first time, they might need a solid starting point to begin with. People do not organize their thoughts in the same way as the others do. The instructor pointed out that even how we organize our thoughts in one language might not be the same as we do in the other language, so giving students' a model could assist them in getting a clearer sense of what the criteria of good writing, which students have been searching for, can possibly be. At the same time, they could understand sooner how people in this culture organize their thoughts. That is, students can hopefully better understand the appropriate way of organizing their thoughts in English. At least, according to this writing teacher, this writing instruction aims to help students develop a concrete sense of what a well-developed, well-organized, and well-supported writing looks like.

This study aimed to examine if this writing instruction of an ESL intermediate undergraduate writing class at a Mid-West research university in the U.S. aimed to prepare students to be cultural producers, reproducers or cultural products, if the instructor was aware of the connection between language, culture, and thought, and if the writing instruction emphasized transmission, acquisition or both.

I did a purposeful sampling in selecting two participants, two Taiwanese undergraduate students, Vivian and Johnny, pseudonyms, due to my Taiwanese background that allows me to have a better understanding about them ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. After junior high school in Taiwan, Vivian, twenty-one years old, attended a five-year junior college of commerce, and Johnny, nineteen years old, is a high-school graduate. Before this quarter, both of them had been in the U. S. for six months. Vivian took courses at Boston University and Johnny attended the ESL summer program at this Mid-west university. The course instructor had lived in Hong Kong for fourteen years and has been teaching ESL writing over two decades.

The triangulated methods for the data collection here included: (a) classroom observations for ten weeks; (b) field notes; (c) two semi-structured interviews with the instructor; (d) collection of two students' written drafts and final ones for course assignments; and (e) four semi-structured interviews, including retrospective accounts of their writing and perceptions of the writing instruction. All data were analyzed holistically, analytically, and intertextually (prior, 1995) with an emphasis on how the instructor took care of the match and mismatch between students' L1 (home) cultures and L2 (American/English) cultures.

2. Results

- Cultural agents or products? The course instructor claimed that he adopted a dual approach to prepare students to write clear, well-organized, and well-supported papers. Due to the learning behaviors of most Asian students, who were comfortable with presentation-oriented instruction, during the first half of the quarter, he used deductive approach, transmission-oriented, to equip students with basic foundations and prepare them for the collaborative writing tasks required in the last five weeks. Later on, he used an inductive approach by creating a writing lab for students to independently acquire language, reading and writing competence and, more importantly, critical thinking skills. In short, the writing instruction started with a focus on declarative knowledge and gradually incorporated procedural knowledge through instructor's guidance and required writing assignments for this course.

This writing instruction was to guide students to be active cultural agents, rather than cultural products. During the first phase of the course, the instructor adopted deductive approach, including writing samples and plenty of teacher talks to prepare students to be active agents for the second phase of the course, adding the L2 cultural understanding to students L1 "webs".

- Awareness of the connection between language, culture, and thought. The instructor indicated that people of different cultures and languages are inclined to organize thoughts differently, so he used modeling to help these Asian students to bridge the mismatch between their habitual ways of writing and thinking from their L1 and the expected ways of writing and thinking from L2 to achieve academic success in American academic settings. He gave them writing samples to help students build concrete understanding of what a well-supported, well-organized, and well-developed essay, which explicitly showed Western ways of thinking and ways of writing, was like. To avoid teaching ESL writing as colonization, he addressed the differences between L2 (English) discourse and ESL students' L1 (home languages) to help them build up necessary sensitivities, understanding and skills about the diverse rhetorical practices

- Transmission, acquisition, or both? The curriculum design clearly valued both transmission and acquisition in pursuing L2 academic literacy(ies). His explicit teaching demonstrated his assumptions about the need of learning through transmission before acquisition. However, in the last five weeks, the writing lab invited students to practice what they had learned in the first five weeks, and to independently acquire necessary rhetorical rules through collaboratively accomplishing writing tasks with their peers although the instructor was always available for “scaffolding”.

3. Implications

We construct and reconstruct our cultures, the whole lived experiences, or webs, everyday. Relatively, ESL students who have even more challenging tasks in dealing with cultural issues between L1 and L2 have more urgent needs to learn how to cope with these cultural tasks. There is growing recognition that we belong to more than one community and consequently, to achieve academic success, it is critical that ESL students need to learn to switch back and forth between different cultures. Guerra (1997) proposes that our goal as writing teachers is to prepare student to be active cultural agents, who are able to consciously and effectively switch interculturally, when necessary.

From the writing instruction of this ESL class, it is evident that explicit teaching or discussion the cultural differences between L1 and L2 can be of tremendous help for ESL students to learn the expected ways of writing without compromising their L1 cultures and identities. Lu (1992) states that writing teachers should help students with their restructuring and repositioning when dealing with conflicting cultural values and forces (p. 906). In fact, experiences with the negotiations of tensions between cultures or discourse will promote students to be conscious knowledge shapers (Spellmeyer, 1997).

(3) Transmission or acquisition or both? The priority of pursuing procedural or declarative knowledge has been a long-time debate in ESL writing instruction. The conventions from the monolithic paradigm emphasize conformity over diversity in literacy practice, but Delpit (1988) points out the critical need for minority students to learn the codes of the culture of power, showing students the way to learn and acquire the expected ways of thinking, ways of reading, and ways of writing. The writing instruction of this study helps to ground the Vygotskian theory that learning is prior to development or acquisition; namely, without explicit teaching, ESL students are less likely to be able to acquire the somewhat implicit ways of written discourse. However, it is necessary for students to attend to the arbitrariness of the codes and about the power relationship they represent (Isle & Mano, 1997).

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