外语·文化·教学论丛

Critical Pedagogy in EFL College Writing Instruction in China : An Untested Feasibility

大学英语写作教学与批判教育学

桂　林　著

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Foreword

Dale T. Snauwaert
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Language is a core dimension of both culture and self-identity. Identity is embedded in culture, which is in turn mediated by language. The acquisition of a foreign language, therefore, has a potential transformative effect on the self-identity of the individual, and when introduced on a mass social scale, as is the case in China with the mass introduction of English, it has both intended and unintended consequences on the culture and society at large.

In this book Gui Lin explores these issues, with a particular focus on self-identity formation in the pedagogy of English writing instruction in China. She applies Paulo Freire's theory of critical consciousness and critical pedagogy as her theoretical framework, specifically the notion of "untested feasibility." Gui Lin's central research question is: "Does Freire's critical pedagogy offer a philosophically and educationally compelling response to the lack of self-identity in EFL college writing in China?"

Paulo Freire posits the general historical existence of a social reality dominated by oppression. In response he points us towards the possibility of a society constituted by authentic subjects co-existing in dialogical solidarity seeking to fulfill their ontological vocation to become more fully human. The core problematic is how to move from oppression to liberation and empowerment, which entails both the transformation of the structures of consciousness and the transformation of the social structure. The Freirean means to this end is cultural action—dialogical and problem-posing educational

interventions (critical pedagogy) to facilitate critical consciousness and authentic subjectivity. Within this theoretical framework Freire conceives hope as "untested feasibility." Freire maintains that there is a strong tendency to perceive social reality as reified, as fixed. This perception locks the individual in a reality that is hopeless, leading to a disempowered self-concept. Freire maintains, however, that it is possible to understand social realities as fluid limit situations that are social constructions subject to critique and transformation. Critical pedagogy is a method that engages in problem-posing activities that re-present taken-for-granted social assumptions into problems to be explored and understood in critical ways. It constitutes a method that empowers and liberates the consciousness of the student.

Critical pedagogy is an alternative to what Freire refers to as "banking education." "Banking education" is an instructional delivery system that is designed to uncritically transmit cultural artifacts from teacher to student. It is a transmission educational model. Gui Lin documents the fact that the banking model is universally employed in EFL writing instruction in China, and she argues that this approach significantly neglects the development of authentic and empowered self-identity. Consequently, EFL instruction in China constitutes a kind of linguistic imperialism: the uncritical imposition of a powerful foreign linguistic element into the consciousness of the student population of China, absent the development of the critical capacities to preserve authentic self-identity.

Gui Lin's rigorous and insightful analysis has the potential to be a significant transformative influence on EFL writing instruction in China, and as a result, a transformative force in Chinese society. Gui Lin's Freirean analysis is itself an example of untested feasibility in the sense that it presents the possibility of a transformative education in China in a time of great social change. Her book deserves a wide readership and careful consideration.

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Preface

The institutional English language policies in China, such as the *College English Curriculum Requirements* (CECR), the *Syllabus for College English Test Band 4* and the *College English Tests*, set standards for the teaching and learning of College English, and serve national, social and economic advancement. As the CECR states, "The objective of College English education is to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges" (Ministry of Education, 2007, Character and Objective of College English Section, para. 4). What is absent in the national level agenda is the students' self. After analyzing sample essays of College English Test Band 4, the writer identifies the lack of self-identity as a prevalent issue in EFL college writing in China, and considers this the result of institutional imposition of English education under the global impact of English linguistic imperialism. In this study, 'self' is considered a rational being, able to critically examine the social and political contexts, in which he/she is embedded, to express his/her own needs, interests and thoughts, and to make decisions on things that affect his/her life. The purpose of this study is to explore critical pedagogy as an alternative to respond to the lack of self-identity in EFL college writing instruction in China. To address this issue and achieve this purpose, the writer argues that Freirean critical pedagogy is necessary, though not sufficient, to transform the dominant banking paradigm in EFL college writing instruction to a problem-posing paradigm, so as to help create a critical writer identity in EFL college writing in China.

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My extreme gratitude goes to my family. My mother, Zhaoying, and my father, Baomin, have supported me, as always, without any complaint. The memory of them watching me with loving eyes on my departure to America has filled this long journey with emotional warmth. I, from the bottom of my heart, appreciate my husband, Yonggan, whose immense love, understanding and support, across the ocean, has accompanied me through time and tides in this long journey. I am also truly grateful to my son, Mi, for accompanying me in this foreign country. Last, but not the least, my sincere thanks goes to all members of my family and friends for their care and support.

Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction……1
Prelude……1
1.1 Overview……2
1.2 Theoretical Framework ……7
1.3 Methodology……8
1.4 Purpose of the Study……10
1.5 Overview of Chapters……11

3.2 Teacher Authority: Implementing Institutional Imposition of English…42
3.2.1 Pedagogies in college EFL writing instruction in China……42
3.2.1.1 Grammar-based approach……43
3.2.1.2 Functional/Current-traditional approach……45
3.2.1.3 Genre-based approach……49
3.2.2 EFL writing instruction: Pragmatic rather than ideological……53
Chapter 4 Lack of Writer's Self-Identity……59
4.1 Method……60
4.2 Findings……61
4.3 Analyses……62
4.3.1 The Confucian self……65
4.3.1.1 A selfless self……65
4.3.1.2 A relational self……66
4.3.1.3 A ritual self……67
4.3.1.4 Self as a form of the Way (*dao*) ……68
4.3.2 Mao Zedong's self……68
4.3.3 Post-Mao Zedong's self……73
4.4 Discussion……77
Chapter 5 Creating a Critical Writer Identity in EFL College Writing in China……80
5.1 Critical Pedagogy……80
5.1.1 Critical consciousness……82
5.1.2 A dialogical relationship……86
5.2 From a Banking Paradigm to a Problem-Posing Paradigm: Creating a Critical Writer Identity……90
5.2.1 Provoking student autonomy through dialogue……91
5.2.2 Developing critical literacy through empowerment of critical consciousness……96
Chapter 6 Conclusion……100
6.1 Revisiting the Research Question……100
6.2 Confronting Barriers to the Implementation of Critical Pedagogy to EFL College Writing in China……103
Postlude……110
References……111

Appendix A: A Computer- and Classroom-Based College English Teaching

Chapter 1

Introduction

Prelude

A school shuttle took us, faculty and staff, to our campus at a university

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1.1 Overview

English has become the most widely learned foreign language in China. Children start learning English in elementary schools and continue in high schools. When they go to college, all non-English major students are required to take the curriculum of College English in their first two years at college. Most significant, they have to take a national standardized English test known as the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) (2007) at the end of their sophomore year. A certificate in the CET-4 (or an upper level of the CET-6 for those students who want to pursue a master's degree) is necessary for their educational as well as professional promotion. English composition has been an indispensable part of the CET-4 since its appearance in 1987. The writing section consists of a 30-minute essay of about 120 words. Considering the significance of English composition in the nation-wide standardized test, a basic question raised for English writing teachers can be: What constitutes "good writing"?

Li (1996) administered a semi-ethnographic survey of United States (U.S.) and Chinese writing teachers concerning what constitutes "good writing." The following statement is representative of Chinese writing teachers: "Good Writing, therefore, should carry a positive, or more desirably, a profound moral message; never mind whether it be a mere reiteration of a popular witticism or what parents or teachers have preached to the writer" (p. 90); in contrast, U.S. writing teachers said that significant writing should be "...the exploration of self. It is very important for writers to deal with life, to reflect, to look into themselves and the meaning of their lives. That is the whole purpose of writing as far as I am concerned" (p. 91). The quote from the Chinese writing teacher concerning what constitutes "good writing" is indicative of the general absence of student-writers' self-identity.

To provide future evidence of this absence, I searched the specialized College English Test Band 4 (CET-4, 2007) website, as well as one of the

Education, 2007, Basic Requirements Section, para. 2). Under what is tested in the *Syllabus for College English Test Band 4* (2007) (the *CET-4 Syllabus*) by the National College English Testing Committee (NCETC, 2007), students are required to write a 100-120 word composition which has correct content, coherent discourse and grammatical accuracy. Again, what is absent in the national level agenda is the students' self.

"Self" is common in the Western literature and thus in Western composition. Canagarajah (1990) defines self as "An autonomous entity" (p. 90). Ivanic (1997) contends that a discoursal self is salient to the writing process. Chu (1985) argues that writer presence contributes to ego-involvement. Hyland (2001) argues that writer presence is closely associated with authorial identity and authority. However, a search of journal publications through the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), etc., shows little literature on self-identity in writing or on the lack of self-identity in EFL writing in China. Instead, many articles focus on technical aspects of writing an essay in English. Leki (2001) contends that literature on English writing instruction primarily comes from English-dominant countries, which he called "the 'Center' countries. The particular situation of writing instruction in non-English-dominant countries has received insufficient attention" (p. 197). Melinda Reichelt (in press) makes a critical study of foreign language (FL) writing instruction in six contexts: Poland, Germany, USA, China, Spain and Japan and finds that, "Writing is used as a means of reinforcing overall TL [target language] skills, especially grammatical structures and vocabulary" (Chapter 7, Discussion Section, para. 1). Therefore, there is scholarship concerning the role of the writer's self in the process of writing in English-dominant countries but not in non-English-dominant countries, like China. In this study, "self" is considered a rational being, able to critically examine the social and political contexts, in which he/she is embedded, to express his/her own needs, interests and thoughts, and to make decisions on things that affect his/her life.

From my previous experiences as an EFL teacher at a university in China and from my review of English language policies such as the CECR

(2004 & 2007) issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education and the *CET-4* –

Freire (1990) regards the relationship between the teacher and students as oppression and dehumanization. In contrast to the banking model of education, Freire (1990) promotes the problem-posing model of education, in which the teacher values the students' humanity by regarding them as equal human beings. The relationship between the teacher and students is reciprocal, dialogical and humanist, which helps nurture students' critical consciousness to challenge social and political forces that affect their lives and study. In the process of challenging these forces, they transform themselves and the world around them and thus become more fully human (Freire, 2004; 2005).

This study intends to inquire into the research question: Does Freire's critical pedagogy offer a philosophically and educationally compelling response to the lack of self-identity in EFL college writing in China? The answer to this question involves the justification of my argument that critical pedagogy is necessary, though not sufficient, to transform the dominant banking paradigm in EFL college writing instruction to a problem-posing paradigm, so as to help create a critical writer identity in EFL college writing in China. Freire's critical pedagogy is adopted to support the argument, because the current pedagogies in EFL college writing instruction in China fit into what Freire (1990) critiques as a banking education, primarily characterized by a relationship of oppression and dehumanization. It is a pedagogy that undermines students' self-identity. I focus on the two basic elements in Freire's critical pedagogy: a dialogical relationship and critical consciousness. I consider these significant for responding to the lack of self-identity in EFL college writing in China, because a dialogical relationship between the teacher and students aims to nurture students with critical consciousness to challenge the status quo that dominates their lives. The nurturing of critical consciousness has the potential to produce an empowered self.

I consider this study significant. It will question the current English language policies and practices in EFL college writing in China and discuss a prevalent issue resulting from them. The feasibility of implementing

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