Teaching Composition around the Pacific Rim

Politics and Pedagogy

Edited by

Mark N. Brock

and

Larry Walters

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Foreword

The teaching of composition to non-native speakers of English has grown to assume an importance that it did not possess even a few short years ago. Previously, many, if not most, ESL teachers were more interested in teaching grammar, pronunciation, conversation and, to some extent, reading; writing was mainly considered a tool for reinforcing the other skills. However, following an influx of foreign students to English-speaking countries beginning in the late 1970s as well as an increasing interest in English composition in universities around the world, the importance of teaching English composition to non-native speakers has grown exponentially.

ESL professionals and others given the task of preparing non-native students to function within academic discourse communities are faced with a problem of some magnitude. How can they help these students acquire the grammar and mechanics of writing as well as the necessary composing skills and research abilities needed to succeed within the academy? Complicating their task is the fact that these students represent different parts of the world with different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. In meeting this challenge, teachers and researchers have conducted research and borrowed a body of theory from the field of first language composition studies in an attempt to provide a theoretical base for the teaching of ESL composition. Many have concluded that, in a very general way, writing in a second language is similar to writing in a first language, and research in first language composition is, at least in part, relevant to the teaching of ESL composition.

The purpose of this volume is to extend the research base of ESL composition by providing a forum for discussing the teaching of English composition in a specific part of the world, the Pacific Rim. The importance of the Pacific Rim to the world community is widely recognized, and the role of English as a language of international and intranational communication within and across countries of this region is also well-documented. As an increasing number of students from Pacific Rim countries study English in their own countries and in other, English-speaking countries, and as the use of written English becomes more and more common in and

between Pacific Rim countries, the need for a public forum in which to consider research and pedagogical issues relating to Pacific Rim students of English assumes significant importance. Some of the questions to be considered within this forum include: What are some of the specific problems in teaching composition in the Pacific Rim? What role should Western rhetorical patterns play in the teaching of composition in Pacific Rim countries? Is teaching composition in the Pacific Rim different from teaching composition in other parts of the world? What research is being conducted in individual countries? What are some successful and unsuccessful approaches to the teaching of composition currently in use in the Pacific Rim? How do the educational systems of individual countries help or hinder the teaching of composition? What effect has the process approach to teaching composition had in individual countries around the Pacific Rim?

The contributors to this volume address these questions and consider other concerns teachers and researchers face in teaching composition to Pacific Rim students. One concern of this volume is the political consequence of imposing Western rhetorical patterns on Pacific Rim students. Indeed, one may ask if it is ever appropriate to impose Western rhetorical patterns on these students or, as some have suggested, should these students be encouraged to develop their own voices in English within their own communities? As English becomes the native or near-native language of many peoples of the Pacific Rim, questions concerning its use in written discourse within these contexts abound.

Sandra McKay begins this volume by acknowledging the power of the traditional Western model of academic discourse while affirming the validity of other models. She concludes that Pacific Rim writers who want to emulate Western rhetorical discourse must acquire a certain amount of sociocultural knowledge about that discourse. She categorizes this knowledge into morphosyntactic, semantic, rhetorical and topic development levels and discusses examples of each.

The two papers which follow consider the political consequences of teaching Western rhetorical patterns to Pacific Rim students. Lian- Aik Wong and Jacinta Thomas discuss the effects of teaching Western rhetoric in Singapore and India, countries in which English serves both international and intranational purposes. They suggest that the imposition of Western rhetorical patterns will stifle creativity as it does not allow students to develop authentic voices in English through writing. Mark Brock takes a similar position in addressing the teaching of composition in Hong Kong.

Closely related to the issues of rhetoric is the question of reading material: Specifically, what kinds of reading materials are appropriate for use in composition classrooms in the Pacific Rim? Some purists might argue, of course, that only works by Western authors should be introduced to students to read and respond to in writing. Sandra Tawake and Larry Smith argue that a more appropriate source of reading material is provided by Pacific and Asian literatures in English, as Pacific Rim students will find this material 'more relevant to their own life situations'. Similarly, Thomas Clayton advocates the use of local stories and schema as a departure point for teaching composition to Malaysian students preparing to study in the United States.

The remaining five papers in this collection deal less with political or canonical concerns and more with pedagogical issues. The paper by Larry Walters documents the early educational experiences of several Asian American basic writers enrolled in university in the United States. Through the use of journal excerpts he illustrates the effect of these experiences on their performance as writers in university. Martha Pennington and Dong-mei Zhang report a survey they conducted of writing attitudes of Chinese graduate students at the University of Hawaii. Valerie Arndt discusses the role of feedback in teaching a specific population of Pacific Rim writers, while Jacquelyn Milman describes a content-based approach to teaching composition at the University of Guam. In the final paper, Ron White describes a classroom-based research project he conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a process-oriented approach to teaching composition to a class of Japanese undergraduates.

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1 Sociocultural Factors in Teaching Composition to Pacific Rim Writers: An Overview

SANDRA L. McKAY

> *Language is essentially rooted in the reality of culture.*
> (Malinowsky, 1923)

Introduction

To a large extent, effective writers are successful because they meet the expectations of their audience. They know what to write and what not to write so as to establish a strong reader–writer relationship. The decisions that they make in the writing process are based on their knowledge of the social conventions that they share with their readers, conventions which permeate every level of their writing—syntactic, semantic, rhetorical and topic. When individuals attempt to write in a second language, although they may know that they need to consider the social framework in the writing process, they may not be aware of the particular conventions that need to be employed. They may wrongly assume that the social conventions that exist in their native language are also operative in their second language so that, for example, structuring an argument or supporting a main point are the same in both cultures. Making these assumptions can result in their being misunderstood and less effective writers.

In order to help Pacific Rim writers avoid such miscalculations, this paper sets forth the social conventions that individuals need to master to be effective writers within a western framework. It also suggests specific factors which may make it difficult for Pacific Rim writers to acquire these conventions. The discussion is in Pike's (1954) terms an *emic* view in that it outlines what in many western cultures is necessary to be an effective

writer, needs which may differ in other cultures. However, to the extent that writers of Pacific Rim countries want to become effective writers within a western cultural framework, it is knowledge that they will need to acquire. The paper begins by exploring four levels of social conventions that Pacific Rim students need to master in order to be effective writers, namely, the morphosyntactic, semantic, discourse and topic levels. Examples of essays written by Pacific Rim student are included in the discussion in order to illustrate how the application of alternate social conventions on any level can jar the western readers' expectations, undermining the reader–writer relationship. The paper ends with suggestions for helping students master the social conventions outlined in the paper.

Although the paper focuses on what Pacific Rim writers need to do to be effective writers within a western framework, this is not meant to suggest that western readers should not strive to accommodate to different social conventions employed by writers from other cultures. Writing differences arising from alternate social conventions ideally should be resolved by accommodations on the part of both the reader and writer. However, since language teachers have little ability to encourage accommodations on the part of the western reader, this paper focuses on what language teachers of Pacific Rim writers who are either studying in the west or preparing to study in the west can do to help their students become effective writers within a western framework. In this paper then an effective writer is one who is able to meet western readers' expectations, thereby achieving credibility with this audience. We turn now to a discussion of the social conventions adhered to by such writers.

Social Conventions

The morphosyntactic level

Effective writers in English have mastered the morphosyntactic rules dictated by the society in which they are operating. Although many of the social conventions regarding this level of language are codified in dictionaries and grammar books, the acceptability of some of these conventions are debated such as when to use *who* or *whom* and when to use *like* or *as*. Nevertheless, the vast majority of conventions on the morphosyntactic level have a high degree of consensus in the society. The degree of consensus, however, is quite complex when one considers the development of institutionalized varieties of English. (For a definition of institutionalized varieties of English, as well as a discussion of their features, see Kachru, 1986 and Platt *et al.*, 1984.) Take, for example, the following sentences:

(1) That way the forms would be filled and processed within minutes, rather than have the passengers fill up all the details while at the check point.

(2) With three days to go before acceptance, the battle for Umno Youth Exco seats is hotting up.

Both contain items that would be unacceptable in Standard American English: *fill up* in Sentence 1 and *hotting up* in Sentence 2. However, the fact that both sentences appeared in major English newspapers in Malaysia (Sentence 1 in the *Sunday Star* (3/31/85:2) and Sentence 2 in *New Straits Times* (6/14/80:1) as cited in Lowenberg, 1990: 220) illustrates that different standards of acceptability often exist in institutionalized varieties of English, raising the question of which standards a writer should adhere to. Clearly, Malaysians writing English in Malaysia will need to learn a certain set of morphosyntactic conventions to be effective within this setting. However, these conventions may need to be adjusted when a Malaysian writes to an audience within another social framework.

The fact that some conventions such as the pluralization of words like *attendance, lettuce* and *entertainment* exist in Malaysian English and British English but not American English raises another issue, namely which social conventions should Malaysians employ in an international context. While writers using the sentence, 'There are many entertainments possible in the city', would be seen as credible writers of Malaysian and British English, they would not be viewed as credible writers of American English. The question then of which form a Malaysian should use in an international setting is complicated since there is less social consensus on these matters in an international framework than in a national one. Different standards in spelling between British and American English can cause further difficulties for some Pacific Rim students in their attempt to master the social conventions of English. Dryden (1987), for example, in her study of the writing processes of Malaysian college students studying in the United States found that some of her subjects' confusion with American and British spelling impeded their writing process and caused them to commit many spelling errors.

Although choices of such things as whether or not to pluralize a particular word do not affect intelligibility, they do affect an individual's credibility within a particular speech community. In order to be effective writers of English, Pacific Rim students will need to master the morphosyntactic rules of English that are utilized by their target audience. While many Pacific Rim students from countries where an institutionalized variety of English exists have already mastered one set of morphosyntactic conventions, they need to be aware that the acceptability of these conventions may

change in other social frameworks and learn to apply the rules that will best establish rapport with their intended audience.

The semantic level

Effective writers of English also know what lexical items to select based on the collocational pattern and pragmatic force of the words. Assessing their relationship with their audience, they know when it is appropriate, for example, to use *suggest* and when it is appropriate to use *urge*. They also know how the language divides up reality, having a keen sense of what distinction English makes between such things as a *party* and a *feast* or a *walk* and a *stroll*. Part of learning a language is learning how that language divides up reality. For second language learners, the fact that English may not have categories that exist in their native language or that the native language has items that do not exist in English may lead them to violate writing conventions on the semantic level. For example, the fact that Thai does not make the distinctions made in English between *plant* and *tree, boat* and *ship, desk* and *table* or *closet* and *cabinet* (Siriphan, 1988:102) may lead Thai writers to write sentences that violate collocation patterns of English. A Thai student, not realizing the distinction made between closet and cabinet, might write, 'The clothes were hung in the bedroom cabinet'. Because the inclusion of such sentences in written discourse jars the relationship between the writer and reader, Pacific Rim students need to recognize that different languages divide reality differently and then master the lexical distinctions made in English which differ from those of their native language.

Effective writers of English have also mastered stylistic conventions regarding word choice, realizing that in expository prose English places a high value on conciseness. The value placed on conciseness, however, is not shared by all cultures. Chutisilp (1985:176 as cited in Siriphan, 1988:112), for example, maintains that in Thai writing, redundancy is considered elegant 'because the writer has the opportunity to use "more words"'. In her study of Thai writers writing in English, Siriphan (1988:159) found that Thai writers carried their preference for redundancy over to their writing in English, using sentences like the following:

I could not understand any English *at all the day after one day* I arrived.

I got *so much* nervous.

He would repeat it *again and again*.

In their study of ESL students in Singapore, Fagan & Cheong (1987:19) found that many of their students exhibited 'flowery, metaphorical styles' when they wrote in English. Fagan & Cheong believe that the use of this

style in their students' writing is due to an emphasis in Chinese on the use of metaphors, allegories and analogies which their students transfer to English. Redundancy and a flowery, metaphorical style, while elegant in some languages, is not in keeping with a western emphasis on conciseness. Since using words in such a manner within a western framework will weaken the reader–writer relationship, Pacific Rim students need to learn which stylistic patterns of their native language are not in keeping with the stylistic conventions of English.

As on the morphosyntactic level, the existence of institutionalized varieties of English affects conventions on a semantic level. Often institutionalized varieties of English develop their vocabulary through the borrowing of native terms or through semantic innovation in which English words are expanded or used in a manner consistent with the lending language. Because of this development in the lexicon of institutionalized varieties, students who have mastered a particular variety of English may assume that the words they have learned in their variety of English are acceptable in other varieties of English. A Malaysian writer using *gotongroyong* (a form of communal cooperation), *adat* (a body of traditional law) or rotan (a ratan cane used for official punishments) when writing English may be surprised to learn that these words, though common in Malaysian English, are not used in other varieties of English. (Examples are from Lowenberg, in press: 6–7.) If writers from countries where an institutionalized variety exists wish to meet their readers' expectations on a semantic level, they will need to learn which words are appropriate in which varieties of English.

The level of rhetorical development

In addition to knowing how to meet the readers' syntactic and semantic expectations, effective writers also know how to organize their essays to meet their audience's expectations. These expectations, however, will differ from culture to culture. In reference to Pacific Rim writers, several researchers have characterized important differences in audience expectations between eastern and western cultures. Kaplan (1966), for example, in a seminal article on contrastive rhetoric maintains that eastern writing is marked with indirection in which 'things are developed in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are' (as cited in McKay, 1984:49). More recently, Hinds (1987) has distinguished two types of writing: the first, of which English is typical, is writer responsible so that it is the writer's responsibility for effective communication; the second, of which Japanese and other Pacific Rim countries is typical, is reader responsible so that the reader is primarily responsible for effective communication.

One factor that may be contributing to both Kaplan's and Hind's characterization of Pacific Rim writing is the fact that several Pacific Rim countries have been influenced by a pattern of rhetorical development which originated in classical Chinese poetry. In this pattern the first section, called the *ki*, begins an argument, followed by the *shoo* which develops the argument. The third section, the *ten*, abruptly changes the direction of the argument to an indirectly related connected sub-theme while the fourth section, the *ketsu*, reaches a conclusion (Eggington, 1987 and Hinds, 1987). The fact the third section, the *ten*, introduces a new topic may lead western readers to see this section as an irrelevant aside while eastern writers are likely to view this section as introducing an important tangential topic that the reader must relate to the main topic.

Another factor which may be contributing to the characterization of much Pacific Rim writing as indirect and reader responsible is the fact that the statement of purpose for many Pacific Rim writers may not be initially stated in the discourse. Chutisilp, for example, (1985 as cited in Siriphan, 1988:112) maintains that a typical style for Thai writers is to delay the introduction of purpose. She maintains that for 'Thai English writers, getting to the point too soon does not stimulate the readers' curiosity nor does it create suspense. It is common, therefore, to find an elaborate maze of wordiness before arriving at the topic sentence which is normally placed at the end of a passage'. Hinds (1990:99) maintains that the writing of many Pacific Rim writers has what he calls a 'delayed introduction of purpose' which has 'the undesirable effect of making the essay appear incoherent to the English-speaking reader, although the style does not have that effect on the native reader'.

What Hinds calls a 'delayed introduction of purpose' is evident in the following essay written by a Japanese student studying English in the United States. The student was responding to an assignment based on W. Somerset Maugham's short story, 'Appointment in Samarra', a story which supports the idea of the unavoidability of fate. The student was asked to state her belief about fate or free will and to support her view with a personal example. After an introductory paragraph which summarized W. Somerset Maugham's story, the student continues:

> In the fifteenth century, Puritans believed that they never could be sure if they were one of 'The Elect'. Therefore, they tried to work harder. Before that, people believed in 'The Doctrine of Predestination' which meant that destinies were decided by God. People didn't work because they thought no matter how much they worked, their fate had been decided by God. On the other hand, the new attitude toward the work of 'the Elect', made people work hard, for if they worked hard, they

could change their life. This attitude helped to change history; they made great economic growth.

I do believe in fate, but not in the same way as is presented in 'The Doctrine of Predestination'. We should try hard to improve our life and our mind, even though our fate may have been decided. Otherwise, we are just waiting for our unchangeable destiny, Death.

The first paragraph appears initially unrelated to the argument. Thus, a reader who is used to a deductive presentation with an immediate statement of purpose is left somewhat confused. However, the information in the paragraph is essential to the author's ultimate argument which appears to be as follows. In American history, people challenged the Puritan idea of predestination, believing instead that hard work could alter an individual's life. The author appears to believe that there is fate but not of the type that is unalterable as held by the doctrine of predestination. Rather one should work hard to 'improve one's life and mind' so that life is not passed waiting for death. The seeming aside then on the theory of predestination and the work ethic are necessary foundations for the writer's conclusion. However, the reader is left to make the connection between the discussion of predestination and the writer's central point. This approach is in keeping with Hinds' (1990:146) characterization of Japanese rhetorical development in which it is 'the reader's responsibility to determine the relationship between any one part of an essay and the essay as a whole'. The essay illustrates the manner in which the writer has employed the social conventions of rhetorical development in Japanese to her writing in English.

Norment (1986) in his study of Chinese students writing in English found this same transference of writing strategy. The study sought to determine to what extent native Chinese speakers of English used similar modes of organization in writing narrative and expository essays in their native language and in English. Norment found that the Chinese writers in both narrative and expository writing varied their organizational pattern very little, using relatively few explanatory sentences both in writing Chinese and English. However, the patterns employed by the Chinese subjects were quite different from the English writers who tended to use many explanatory sentences in both their narrative and expository writing. Norment (1986:69) concludes that 'the organizational structures of written discourse produced in two rhetorical modes by Chinese subjects was transferred when they wrote in English'.

While many of the studies cited above suggest that transference is the major cause of L2 writers using different rhetorical patterns, Mohan & Lo (1985) argue persuasively that it is unwise to attribute all of the differences to the writers' transference of rhetorical patterns. They believe that 'what

may be more critical is the student's general level of development in composition' (p. 517). Many native speakers, as they point out, have not yet mastered nor will they ever master certain rhetorical patterns of English. According to Mohan & Lo, another factor which may be contributing to L2 writers unfamiliarity with English rhetorical patterns is their previous education which may have emphasized accuracy on the sentence level rather than rhetorical development. Whatever the reason—transference, development or education—the fact is that if L2 writers are not able to meet their readers' expectations on the rhetorical level they are likely to be judged as less effective writers by their western audience. (See Land & Whitley, 1989 for a discussion of this effect.) In order to be effective writers in English, Pacific Rim students will need to be able to employ the organizational conventions that their western readers expect.

The level of topic development

Effective writers also meet their audience's expectations on topic development, drawing on schemata that they share with their audience. These schemata, however, often vary from culture to culture. Hu *et al.* (1982), for example, found that Chinese and Australian students writing in English on why one might catch a cold had quite different schemata regarding catching a cold. While most Chinese concluded that catching a cold is due to neglect of self, the Australians focused on catching a cold from someone else. In answer to the topic of how they would try to persuade their younger brother to work hard in school, Chinese students emphasized that they would remind their brother of the importance of study to the nation, an emphasis which was rarely mentioned by the Australian students who stressed instead the general importance of study and its benefits to the individual. Hu *et al.* (1982:40) conclude that the diversity of topics introduced in the two groups of essays is 'due mainly to differences in the informants' social or cultural backgrounds. Informants in the two countries have their own experience of the real world'.

McKay (1989) found that Chinese students of English followed a quite predictable order of topic development when writing on the following topic:

> You were standing in a long queue at a bus stop one evening. First, describe the scene, and then go on to say what happened when it rained.

Many of the students gave a detailed description of the crowd with special attention to the existence of women with children and old people. They frequently described the behavior of the crowd as impolite as they pushed to get on the bus when it arrived. Finally, many students ended

their paper with a moral, chastising the crowd for pushing and ignoring the needs of the women with children and the old people.

Similarity of topic development was also evident in the papers written in response to the topic of free will and fate referred to earlier in the paper in which students were to state their belief in fate or free will. In a writing class in the United States with 23 students from Pacific Rim countries and four students from Central and South America, all but four of the Pacific Rim students chose to support the view of fate often with statements like the following which suggest that one must accept the inevitability of fate:

> I believe we are actors in a play that are directed by something bigger than ourselves....so I try not to resist fate so I can flow with my life.

> I regard that people should believe in fate and accept the fact, then we can think over how to cope with it.

Four of the essays written by Pacific Rim students supported their belief in fate by pointing to an experience they had with a fortune teller in which everything they were told would happen turned out to come true.

On the other hand, the four students from Central and South America, all supported the idea of free will with statements such as the following:

> I strongly believe in free will. I believe that fate (destiny) does not exist because we are the builders of our own destiny. We can be what we want to be. We are the owners of our own destiny; it needs only determination which means free will. Then 'Determination is Free will'.

The marked difference in the views on free will and fate expressed by the Pacific Rim students and the Latin American students was undoubtedly related to cultural and religious differences between these two areas. Like the Chinese and Australian students in the study by Hu *et al.* (1982:40), these two groups seem to have 'their own experience of the real world', experiences which have helped to shape their answer to this question.

Pedagogical Implications

The examples cited above illustrate the manner in which 'the attitudes a writer has acquired, consciously or unconsciously, about rhetoric, communication, written discourse, and even specific syntactic structures are affected by the writer's experience and culture' (Harder, 1984 as cited in Norment, 1986:51). Students who wish to be credible writers in another cultural framework, however, need to become aware of the fact that social conventions governing effective writing differ cross culturally. As teachers of English, we are rightly concerned with how we might raise students'