

Authority, Academic Discourse and Ideology in the ESL Writing Class: An ESL teacher's experience

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This paper describes an ESL teachers' perspective on teaching ESL writing to advanced second language learners reflecting on her experience as an ESL teachers drawing on the students' responses to survey questions. It shows that writing in English as a Second language has political, cultural, and historical aspects since the "nature and functions of discourse, audience, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts" In addition, acquiring the discourse proprieties is challenging because they represent culturally bound, conventionalized, and abstract characteristics of academic prose that are frequently absent in written discourse in rhetorical traditions other than the English dominant educational environments. ESL teachers should get the awareness of the needs and challenges that the face and understand the linguistic, cultural, and educational background they are coming from in order to help them overcome these challenges which also should dictate the instructional pedagogies, curriculum and assessment.

Keywords: academic discourse, ESL writing, teacher's perspective, ideology

Introduction

According to the US department of Education, there were 4.1 million English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the USA (2013). In response to this great increase in enrollment, many ESL educators and researchers are trying to come up with innovative techniques to help students learn English as fast as possible. Most ESL centers at many universities now use intensive programs, a fact that makes the need to find new teaching techniques an urgent necessity. Technology, one-on-one tutoring, peer instruction and peer feedback are among the methods used nowadays to liven up the teaching and encourage ESL college students to learn (Li, 2006; Min, 2006; Rollinson, 2005). However, regardless of the good work that has been put into improving the quality of ESL education, the writing class in particular seems to be in need of more attention (Yoon and Hirvela, 2004). Composition in English is extremely important to international students who are expected to use a lot of written English for academic purposes at the university level during their stay in the US. Seen by many as a preparation course for the writing section of English standardized tests like the TOEFL and the IELTS, the ESL writing class has been limited to one style of writing—the

five-paragraph pattern—with great attention given to imitation and replication of certain topics and writing styles (Hyland 2012; Leki and Carson, 1997).

A Classroom Experience

After three months of teaching an advanced ESL writing class, I decided to have one class to chat with my students and listen to their concerns about writing, which is typically their least favorite class. There were 23 students in this class mostly from Saudi Arabia and China. This decision came after realizing that my students are simply making little to no progress. I wanted to know why they find writing difficult or uninteresting. Their unanimous answer was that they did not think writing was difficult or boring; their problem was about the way ESL writing in general is taught. One student, for example, said that she had taken six writing classes before, yet she never ever liked any topic chosen for her to write about, whether by the book or the instructor. She added that she never felt free to express how she truly felt about a topic. It turned out students did not find writing difficult or boring; they just disagree with what they write about and how the instructors teach the class.

Towards the end of the meeting I asked each member of this group what they would like to write about if I gave them the complete freedom to choose a topic. One student said she would like to write about how she felt that morning when her three year old son hugged her and begged her not to leave him. Another student said she wanted to write about how much and why she disliked the TOEFL and the GRE tests. A third student wanted to write a romantic poem, and another wanted to write a letter of appreciation to her parents. In the two class meetings following that, I gave the students the freedom to write about these topics, and after reading their essays, I noticed that there was a huge difference between what the students wrote throughout the semester and what they wrote that particular time. Although their writings were mostly personal and nonacademic, they were full of meaning and life. They showed me a side of my students I have never seen before, not on the personal level but in the way they expressed the ideas they felt a strong connection to. This experiment made me realize a few important points about ESL composition which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Authority

Unlike L1 composition, the issue of personal voice and authority is usually neglected in ESL composition and the focus is mainly on form not content. ESL writing is a part of applied linguistics programs where the focus is more on the linguistic level of language which more often prioritizes form over content. Terry Santos (1992) explains this tendency in ESL composition,

The injunction in linguistics to be nothing but descriptive has carried over to its applied branch and to TESOL. ESL writing has, in consequence, adopted the research paradigm of applied linguistics, as can be seen in any survey of the literature, where the dominant studies on text analysis, contrastive rhetoric, and academic writing tend to be quantitative. (p.8)

Santos argues that since ESL is seen as a part of linguistics, which is a science, ESL writing becomes different from L1 in several ways, and one of them is that it tends to neglect issues of free expression, ideology, authority and diversity in its research. ESL classes usually are seen as practical preparation courses for the TOEFL test, not for college in general or life in the United States. In the writing class, the students are required to stick to certain patterns of writing. From intermediate to advanced levels, students are asked to write comparison and contrast, cause and effect, classification, or process essays with preselected topics. The teacher chooses the topic and the students write the essays. Personal narratives or non-academic forms of writing are normally not part of the curriculum, and they are not encouraged by either the teachers or the departments. Therefore, students usually write essays they feel no connection to and have no interest in. Personal narratives and opinion pieces on the other hand teach the ESL students critical thinking and the ability to have and defend a position.

Gaining In-depth Understanding

As my interest in voice and authority in ESL writing increased, I decided to create a short survey in which I asked the students about their experience in ESL writing classes since arriving in the United States. The survey was distributed to 60 students currently taking advanced ESL writing classes at two public universities in northeast Ohio. When asked if they have a choice in the topic or type of essay in the writing class, most students responded that they don't. With the exception of some teachers, it appears that most teachers have absolute control over what the students can write about in class. One student commented, "Not only do the teachers choose the topics for us, sometimes they even give us an outline with the thesis statement and supporting topics, and all we have to do is just write the details. Sometimes, I don't agree with the topic, but I have to agree to make the essay long and complete." ESL students take reading classes in which they mainly learn new vocabulary and the proper way to use the words they learn in sentences. They also take grammar classes in which they apply grammatical rules and structures to sentences. These two classes are enough for ESL students to learn about form. The writing class is supposed to teach students to express themselves, think critically and transfer their ideas into organized texts. Focusing on form more than content in the writing class makes students less interested in writing and more interested in imitation because it makes writing seem like a rigid subject in which all you have to do is to follow certain rules over and over again. In a research study, Li (2007) shows how ESL writing and the research about it have all focused on the strategies of writing and learning to write whereas the ESL writer's identity and beliefs in writing have rarely been addressed.

Academic discourse. One other student comment from the survey caught my attention. "Most of the ESL writing classes that I took focus more on the form of the essay. As for the content, the teachers always choose topics that are appropriate for an academic institution," wrote the student responding to what she thought about the essay topics the teachers always choose. What I understand from the student's comment is that her writing teachers choose

certain academic topics in order to emphasize the importance of learning and using academic discourse. Therefore, in order to keep all the students within the boundaries of this discourse, teachers choose topics for them. Just like L1 composition students, ESL students come from different disciplines, and academic discourse differs from one discipline to another and even from one tendency or school to another within the discipline. This means that it is simply impossible to teach all students a so-called academic discourse in an ESL class. Peter Elbow (1991) comments on this issue saying

I cannot teach students the particular conventions they will need for particular disciplines (not even for particular teachers within the same discipline), but I can teach students the principle of discourse variation-between individuals and between communities. I can't teach them the forms they'll need, but I can sensitize them to the notion of differences in form so that they will be more apt to look for cues and will pick them up faster when they encounter them. (p.152)

Students will have enough time to become familiar with academic discourses once they start their academic discipline classes. An ESL writing class, just like an L1 composition class, can help students use personal narratives and opinions from their lives in order to understand and relate to academic discourse. This is a point that Peter Elbow emphasizes more clearly. He stresses the importance of using non-academic discourse in the writing class in order to help the students relate knowledge to everyday life and not just imitate academic discourse. He argues,

Many students can repeat and explain a principle in say physics or economics in the academic discourse of the textbook but cannot simply tell a story of what is going on in the room or country around them on account of that principle-or what the room or country would look like if that principle were different. (p.137)

Elbow does not say that academic discourse is not important; on the contrary, he thinks it is important, but it is not the only important discourse to encourage in the writing classroom. As Elbow recommends, I think the best thing to do is to allow writing by choice. There will be students who want to stick to topics from their discipline, and they will definitely enjoy writing about it because it is something they choose out of personal interest. In fact, several students in my class choose to write about topics relevant to the majors they are interested in. "I don't rule out the writing of academic discourse by choice," writes Elbow, "but if we teach only academic discourse we will surely fail at this most important goal of helping students use writing by choice in their lives." (p.136). Using writing in life is extremely important to ESL students. Most ESL students study in the ESL centers for academic purposes, so most of them do not know how to function outside of an academic environment in the United States. Sometimes they even feel unable to explain what they study at the university to their friends in simple words. ESL writing should help students find that connection between the academic environment and everyday life. Similarly, Bilton (2009) emphasized Elbow's understanding of writing instruction. She argued that the current state of ESL writing is unsatisfactory due to its reliance on the pragmatic approach, and recommends turning ESL writing into an expressive

approach that can give students more room for self-expression, which leads to great improvement in their fluency and mastery of writing.

Ideology. The second point I think is important is that the majority of ESL students in the US today come from Asian countries, with the majority coming from China and Saudi Arabia, where learning is still widely seen as a teacher-centered process. Many of our students went to schools where to pass a test you need to remember everything the teacher says and copy it word for word. What I am trying to say is that many of the ESL students we have in US universities may not even be aware of the idea of choice, freedom and authority in writing since they have always been prone to imitate and do what they are asked to do by teachers. One Saudi student in my writing class told me she repeatedly spotted mistakes in teachers' writings and comments when she was a student in her home country, but it never occurred to her that she needed to correct them because she was always taught to take everything the teacher says for granted even when she did not believe it was right. Just like L1 composition is transitioning towards a post-process pedagogy where the writing is no longer a linear process that starts with the teacher and ends with the teacher (the teacher gives a topic, the students respond to it, the teacher assesses it), ESL writing can go in that direction too. Dwight Atkinson in "L2 Writing in the Post-process Era" raises this issue back in 2003. He poses two important questions:

What do notions like "voice," "critical thinking," "originality," "clarity," and "plagiarism" mean outside the cultural contexts in which they have been developed and are so deeply embedded? At the level of teaching, for example, how do the student-centered, process-oriented, and fluency-focused elements of process pedagogy impact students from educational backgrounds that are teacher-centered, knowledge-oriented, and accuracy-focused? (p.6)

These questions by no means indicate that we need to force the students to adopt the American way of writing. If we do that as ESL teachers, then our pedagogy is not different from the teacher-centered pedagogy we criticize. We need to help students realize the importance of voice and critical thinking themselves without pushing them. We can show them that it is OK to be critical of our writing as teachers and also critical of their own writing. Giving the students the chance to develop voice and authority is a kind of empowerment that will not only benefit their writing but will also make them better citizens. Moreover, the students need to see the teacher in the class not as an authority figure but as a contributing member, not as someone who always gives (teaches), but as someone who gives and takes (teaches and learns).

Political agendas. Finally, another important point in this regard is the use of ESL classes by some teachers to serve political agendas. This is a very critical issue both in L1 and L2 composition. However, this issue has received much more attention in L1 composition than it does in L2 composition, and part of the reason is what I discussed earlier regarding the fact that L1 composition is part of English departments whereas L2 composition is considered part of linguistics departments. Maxine Hairston (1992) in "Diversity, Ideology and Teaching

Writing” discusses the issue of using political agendas in the composition classroom, an issue, she argues, that contradicts with the idea of free speech. Hairston blames all this on the fact that writing classes are still seen as part of the English department. English departments, according to Hairston, are home for many radical leftists and Marxists who see literary criticism and writing as a constant protest against the hegemonic power or the government. Turning a writing class into a place for the instructor to express his or her political views and assigning topics accordingly can affect the students’ opinions especially that students in these classes are not sophisticated enough to freely express their opinions even when they do not agree with the teacher’s. Many people do not know that the situation in ESL composition classes is not much different. In fact, the situation can even be much more serious since the majority of ESL students feel much less sophisticated than American students to express their opinions. This feeling does not only come from the cultural background of many of these students, but it can also be a result of the language barrier. This may make students completely unable to argue with the teacher or try to challenge his or her political views. Yet, some teachers defend their use of politics in ESL classrooms claiming that ESL students need to learn about the politics of the United States in order to better their understanding of the culture.

Just like Hairston argues against the use of politics in L1 composition, I also think that by injecting political and ideological content in the ESL writing class we will be working against the diversity and freedom of speech that we always celebrate in our colleges. Hairston (1992) explains that “students develop best as writers when they can write about something they care about and want to know more about.” So if the teacher or the department limits these courses to discussions of politics and ideology, students may easily lose interest in writing since what they are writing about is not something that interests them in their day-to-day lives. The second reason she presents is that “young writers develop best as writers when teachers are able to create a low-risk environment that encourages students to take chances.” In this case, if students feel pressured to write about certain topics, they might go for mediocrity instead of creativity and survival instead of honesty. They might even become hypocritical in order to please the teacher. Finally, such actions can “severely limit freedom of expression for both students and instructors” (p.189) if they have to conform to topics chosen by the department even when these topics may contradict the students’ (and instructors’) beliefs and feelings.

Politics in the ESL writing classroom can be even more problematic. Some teachers tend to raise political issues from the countries that these students come from. For example, a Chinese student in my class complains that one of the writing teachers raised the issue of Taiwan and its attempts to become independent from China in a class that has several Chinese and Taiwanese students. For these students, this issue is extremely sensitive. The students were all silent, but the teacher kept pushing them to talk about the issue, probably thinking he was doing them a favor. According to the student, the teacher made everyone in the class, including students from other (neutral) countries, very uncomfortable. In another case, a Saudi

woman in the my class complained that some teachers repeatedly raise the issue of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, always citing the example of denying women the right to drive. The woman said that the teacher insisted that students discuss this issue in groups and write an essay about it. She said "I felt the teacher did not want to learn about our culture, she just wanted us to criticize our own, on purpose." These examples show that in addition to the influence the teachers' use of politics in class can have on students' opinions and political orientations, using politics and ideology in the ESL class can result in discomfort, stereotyping and conflict between the students.

Some teachers will cite James Berlin to argue that all types of pedagogy including writing are ideological and that no matter how we try, ideology and bias will always be present in writing. One of the people who adopt this position is Sarah Benesch, an educator and researcher in L2 composition. Benesch (1993), like Berlin, thinks that all forms of writing, including ESL writing, is ideological. She asserts,

L1 composition is not more political than L2. Both are political because all educators make choices, influenced by their political understandings of school and society that affect the development of students. Those choices can encourage or discourage critical thought about school and society. Whether L1 or L2 teachers enable or inhibit critical thinking, they are taking a political stance toward learning and society. (p.714)

While this may be true, the idea here is to try, as a teacher not to make the classroom a political venue. The writing class can be much more useful to both the students and the teachers if the focus is more on the writing itself and the free generating and exchanging of ideas. Students should decide what they want to believe in or what they want to write about and to try not to limit them to certain topics that are of interest to the teacher.

Implications

ESL composition needs to be more student-centered and that it is our duty as teachers to make the students feel that they are in an environment where they can freely express their opinions and feelings, exchange ideas, receive feedback and help one another become better writers. I am not trying to underestimate the role of the teacher in the ESL classroom. In fact, I think the teacher is an integral part of the class. She is needed to manage the class and provide help and assistance to students. The teacher encourages the students to be creative and to express their opinions without fear of being rejected or mocked by her. Teachers should also encourage non-academic topics especially ones where the students get the chance to see themselves, their lives and their experiences as part of what they write about. This does not mean academic discourse is not important, it just means both academic and non-academic discourses in the ESL composition class can be mutually supportive. When it comes to politics, students can write and talk about politics if they feel that they really want to and if it helps to explain what they are trying to learn; otherwise, teachers should not try to impose their politics and ideological agendas on students which may cause hostility or lack of interest.

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