

A symposium on written texts across cultures



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The topic of culture is one of the most fascinating aspects of second-language writing, but also one of the most controversial. Atkinson, for example, states that “[e]xcept for *language, learning, and teaching*, there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL than *culture*.” On the other hand, Williams has told us that “[c]ulture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” Today, with the emphasis on globalization, the movement of people, immigration, international trade, the media, and so on, it is very difficult to talk about culture—or *cultures*.

Taking on a topic as contentious as culture as a research project requires a certain amount of courage; the three speakers in this symposium were brave enough to explore the cultural challenges faced by speakers of different languages when dealing with written texts in English, either as readers or as writers. Sharing the results of research carried out in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, they each took very different approaches to the topic. **Ahmad Al-Hassan** demonstrated how cultural constraints affect the understanding of written English text by speakers of Arabic; **Siân Morgan** reported on the cultural dimensions of one aspect of writing, that of hedging and boosting; and **Tina Wei** showed how cross-cultural email exchange leads to not only linguistic improvement but also to increased cultural understanding.

First to speak was **Ahmad Al-Hassan** who reported on a study designed to compare the effects of providing background information on Jordanian students’ discourse of two short stories. The stories, *Before Their Time* and *The Lottery* were assigned at intermediate readability level to 40 undergraduate students,

chosen at random and divided into four groups. Each group was exposed to two treatment conditions: (a) providing background information necessary for understanding the upcoming texts, and (b) a control condition in which no pre-reading instruction was provided.

Results of multiple-choice tests showed strong positive effects of providing background knowledge; in addition, students' responses to attitude questionnaires showed they generally respond positively to the provision of background information. The attitude questionnaire consisted of ten statements to which students responded on a five-point scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. A large percentage of students indicated they appreciated explanations of difficult vocabulary, description of the characters of the stories, and some background information to better understand and enjoy the stories.

The syntactic, semantic and discoursal challenges pointed out by the 40 students included grammatical affixes, tense, aspect, modality, grammatical and lexical cohesion, correlatives, and a range of technical and sub-technical vocabulary. As indicated in students' responses to the attitude questionnaire, students need assistance with difficult words. Because English vocabulary is likely to pose a problem for many EFL students, it is reasonable to spend class time pre-teaching vocabulary. Pre-reading activities that include vocabulary instruction should be particularly facilitative for difficult texts and with less competent and confident readers.

Cultural differences also presented a challenge. The presenter noted that Jordanian society may reasonably be presumed to be different from British or American culture. In Jordanian culture, God's Word is an absolute; there is none of the

liberalism demonstrated in western culture, where values are apparently more relative. Such differences may create misunderstanding of authentic reading discourse.

The implications of the findings should encourage EFL teachers to give some background information to assist students in reading. Teachers need to know their students and the sort of texts students are reading well, and then construct pre-reading activities that will work for their students (Graves & Piche, 1989).

Next to speak was **Siân Morgan**, who addressed the issue of how hedges and boosters—which express qualification and certainty—play a key role in NS writing in that they allow writers to express modesty, show politeness and acknowledge potential alternative voices (Hyland, 2005). This talk described how Italian undergraduate students use these linguistic items and suggested some consciousness-raising and writing activities to help learners expand their range of modal expressions.

The presenter described a study in which corpus analysis was used to explore discursive writing by high-intermediate students at an Italian university. The findings were summarised as follows:

- Students overused the modals *will*, *should*, *would* and *could* to express probability, possibly a result of teaching or the large amount of attention devoted to modal verbs in text books. This suggests that central modals are easier to manipulate for NNS writers than lexical modal devices, modal nouns or adverbs (Hyland & Milton 1997).

- Students made considerable use of informal items, illustrated in this talk with a concordance line of *really*. Again, several reasons may account for this kind of lexical poverty. Students may still be developing register awareness or may need to build up their lexical resources. Another possibility is that the complex demands of composing may cause them to default to such modal ‘teddy bears’ (Hasselgren).
- Students preferred amplifiers to mitigators and expressed their views rather assertively: This practice leads to ‘shutting down’ rather than opening up a discursive space with the reader, and may be inappropriate for pragmatically sensitive writing events in future academic or professional contexts.

Next, some suggestions for writing teachers were provided. Low (1996) suggests that modal devices are often ‘lexically invisible’ to learners, so the following activities can raise awareness of their function and extend students’ repertoire :

- Learners notice hedges and boosters in their reading, including lexical expressions and adverbials as well as modal verbs. The possible purpose of these is then discussed.
- Learners are given exposure to contextualised use through extensive reading of a variety of texts. This experiential approach helps them become familiar with grammatical and lexical fingerprinting which typically occurs in different writing events.

- Learners remove hedges from texts and discuss the resulting effect on the reader.
- Learners rewrite an academic essay (which uses hedges and boosters) into popular journalistic style (which doesn't) or vice versa. (Hyland)

The final symposium speaker was **Tina Wei**, who reported on a study of how Chinese university students perceived their experience of exchanging emails with native speakers of English, with the purpose of practising their English writing skills while simultaneously expanding their cultural awareness.

The participants in the study were 28 second-year English majors in China. They voluntarily participated in this study and wrote to their epals, who were a group of American high school students and some American, British and Canadian adults, for approximately two months (from September 2006 to November 2007).

Data was collected from questionnaires, interviews, the participants' email texts, and a reflective final report from each participant. The research focused on which topics the participants found interesting to write about in their emails, and on how they perceived what they had learned linguistically and culturally from the experience.

The topics that the participants were interested in writing about included their personal affairs, leisure time, school life, festivals, individualized questions for their epals, and some sharing (for example, of pictures, music, etc.).

The findings showed that some participants reported having learned English expressions, phrases, conjunctions, and some increased the length of their emails. They also learned the informal and colloquial writing style from their epals. A few identified their linguistic difficulties; and some felt that their fluency improved. Above all, they all enjoyed the free writing experience.

The Chinese students perceived that they had expanded their cultural awareness by learning about the following: holidays and festivals; western family structure and relationships; western daily life, including such activities as eating at McDonald's; course options for students and extra-curricular activities. They also reported having learned about the freedom enjoyed by their epals in the educational setting (for example, freedom to speak in class) and about the equality and respect between western teachers and students as well as between parents and children.

As a result, this email exchange project resulted in changing attitudes towards westerners and reconsideration of the stereotypes previously held. While this was an exploratory study, initial results indicate that email writing may be considered as an alternative way of teaching writing, particularly in the mainland Chinese context. Finally, the findings on students' preferred topics seem to resonate with Warschauer's idea that "issues of importance to students' lives" are "the key to success" (2004: 6).

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