Not Just a Matter Of English

Elizabeth Ginsburg provides insight into the learning difficulties that are faced by Asian overseas students in Australia. For faculty staff who are grappling with these problems right now, her analysis might produce a helpful shock of recognition!

Last November I had the privilege of presenting a paper on Study Skills at the JALT (Japanese Association of Language Teachers) Conference in Okyama. During my brief stay in Japan I had the opportunity to visit and observe students' study skills at two universities. In addition, for the last twelve months I have been an Adviser on an Australian project in Beijing, China. My contact with various Chinese universities has given me a greater insight into the foreign student's dilemma. Is it language or is it culture - the problem of access which faces a Chinese or Japanese student when he/she comes to any English-speaking university? Competency and fluency in English language skills taught in EFL (English Foreign Language) or EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classes are not sufficient for students to successfully complete a degree in an academic cultural setting which is bound by traditional restraints and which gives no initiation and very little assistance.

When a Japanese or Chinese student comes to an Australian university to study, the course of study is seldom the logical and intellectual continuation of their previous training. In Japan it is more often decided for them by their parents; in China by their work unit or the government. For a Japanese student, motivation to study in Australia may come from a need to improve English; for a Chinese student, studying English may represent the only way of getting out of China. Australian academics believe that these students have the necessary background knowledge to understand the subject, with its culturally specific assignments and tests, without any explanations.

Studies commissioned by the Australian government in an attempt to improve higher education for students from Asian countries indicate a need to ensure better preparation in terms of both 'study skills' and knowledge of Australian cultural norms, together with practice at participating in discussion, and the assertiveness training necessary to speak in front of large groups. It would be helpful for educational institutions in Japan and China to introduce their students to the cultural rules of the English-speaking university, since students need to modify the world-view of their native culture and the academic culture in which they were educated if they are to gain acceptance in this new academic context. Otherwise, they are likely to fail.

As a trained and experienced IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examiner, I was reminded (by my British trainer) that competency and fluency in English includes a 'world knowledge'. If a student is to pass this test and so gain entrance into a university in Australia, Britain or Canada, then he/she needs to draw upon this 'world knowledge' even in doing the test. What is this 'world knowledge'? It could be more specifically characterised as knowledge of the cultural assumptions and academic conventions required to succeed in an English-speaking university.

Cultural Differences

The problems of Chinese and Japanese students coming to study in Australian universities are more than geographic and linguistic in origin. They grow out of having to cope with different, and culturally determined, forms of thinking and learning, with the different relationships between teacher and student that obtain in Australian institutions, and with different attitudes towards knowledge and authority. There is, in addition, something of a trend in western education toward more learner-centred approaches: a Japanese student, for example, coming to study in Australia will be expected to be more self-reliant and more individualistic in his or her approach to study than would be usual for someone coming from a mass-oriented society like Japan. These factors influence students' performance quite profoundly, and ultimately their success or otherwise at examinations.

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In Australian universities, lecturers may adopt a more casual, informal style of lecturing. Students may even call some lecturers by their first names, and are encouraged to challenge, question and argue with their instructors. In China, knowledge is not open to challenge and extension in this way, and academic education may have little to do with the getting of wisdom. The teacher decides which knowledge is to be taught, and the students accept and learn that knowledge. The lecturer is the authority, the repository of knowledge, leading the student forward into this knowledge, a respected elder transmitting to a subordinate junior. The teacher's role in Japan similarly is accorded great respect, and there is a great gulf between student and teacher. Students relate to their teachers with a kind of veneration, and this produces a learning style characterised by humility. For these students, it may denote a lack of respect if they volunteer either answers or questions. The only questions students ask are for clarification; to challenge or to refer to a different view would be to attack the teacher's competence.

In Australian universities, these students may encounter quite different modes of teaching - problem-solving approaches, experiential learning approaches, in some faculties, Socratic questioning. Our educational thinking is beginning to emphasize the difference between 'surface' learning, an in-depth understanding that can be applied and extended. By contrast, in China, the normal learning strategies are observation, memorization and replication. Lecturers

have an obligation to present all the material that is necessary for the students to know in order to pass the exams successfully. If the student has worked diligently, learned thoroughly the materials presented in lectures and followed the explanations unquestioningly, then the student has the right to pass the exam. If the student fails, it must be the fault of the lecturer who has in some way mislead the student. The lecturer will be severely criticised and the students will be put back into that same lecturer's class next semester.

Students from different cultures bring different purposes to their thinking, and different approaches to reading and writing an essay. Some research suggests that cognitive styles can be categorised as either analytical or relational, and that these categories are very culturally influenced. Students from most Asian cultures tend more towards the relational style - characterised by interdependence, non-assertiveness, verbal restraint, co-operation, conformity, achievement of harmony through the reconciling of opposing forces - than toward the analytical style. The socialization of Chinese children, for example, discourages them from perceiving in the specific and discrete terms that are characteristic of analytical thinking. In English-speaking universities, however, the expectations are that students should gain knowledge through research, critical analysis, evaluation and discussion.

In Japan, English teachers try to encourage, cajole and even threaten the students with being marked absent if they do not speak up in class. These western teachers think up ingenious ways to encourage students to answer questions, engage in dialogues, and participate in discussion in an EAP class. In China spoken English is taught by translating written text aloud or memorizing structured dialogues. The relative lack of emphasis on the spoken verbal skills in these cultures limits the choice of study for many of these students in Australian universities, leading them to choose disciplines which require minimum verbal expression, such as Mathematics, Engineering and the Physical Sciences.

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Conversion between students can provide a bridge into Australian academic culture; it can lead to authentic integration into the university and give the foreign student the information and knowledge necessary to operate at university. However, it is often the case that foreign students stay together for mutual support, and so remain a small alien sub-culture. The non-assertive, reticent communication norms of these Asian students do not make for effective functioning within an English-speaking culture that rewards the assertive and highly verbal.

Cognitive and Rhetorical Difference

High competency in English needs to include understanding colloquialisms as well as the idiom, and also being able to convert spoken discourse into written for rapid note-taking. It means rapid reading for underlying meaning, and the ability to extract the salient points. Reading, like writing, is a complex process carried out through a culturally determined cognitive framework of understanding. Writers of textbooks re-process information through their own language and cultural context. For Asian students reading western textbooks, there can be therefore a mismatch of content schemata, logical reasoning, rhetorical structures and the conventions of organization used in paragraph or larger discourse units. In China, at least, reading is often the only means by which English is learned, and reading a western text poses grammatical, syntactical and lexical problems, since texts are translated literally with no cultural allowances. Kaplan (1966) argues strongly that rhetoric varies from culture to culture, and even from time to time within a given culture.

English thought patterns as reflected in its paragraph structure tend to be direct while oriental thinking tends to be indirect. This may account for the fact that so many of the compositions written by these students seem to English speakers to be out of focus or lacking coherence or organization. Hinds (1989) calls this style of writing 'inductive', a 'delayed introduction of purpose' style. English-speaking readers typically expect that an essay will be organized according to a deductive style.

The Japanese style of reasoning goes around something rather than to the point. Points stick out and could hurt! A comparison of Japanese and English composition indicates that information relevant to the major point may come indirectly and with only minimal syntactic marking. This causes problems for English readers who do not expect unrelated information to come suddenly. There are similar problems around the English notion of a conclusion. A Japanese student will be used to describing, in detail, the social, political or personal background of the topic. The student's purpose in writing is to create for the reader a harmonious understanding of the reasons why conflicting viewpoints develop. The Japanese 'conclusion' need not be decisive. All it needs to do is to indicate a doubt or ask a question. It would not be correct to write a conclusion and tell the reader what he/she should think. The student has been taught that it is bad manners to impose his or her own views on the lecturer. An Australian academic might judge this essay according to Australian academic writing criteria, and make comments such as: *'Where is your opening sentence or paragraph?' 'What is the relevance of this information to the rest of the essay?' 'You have not made any attempt to analyse, evaluate, criticise, argue, judge or compare approaches' . 'What is your conclusion about the relative merits of these different viewpoints?' 'What evidence have you found to support these viewpoints?'*

Comparisons between English and Mandarin linguistic and written discourse suggest a connection between the differences in grammatical structures and the different ways of thinking. The Chinese world view is non-linear, with no starting points. Historical events are seen as unrelated events, a process of endless returns within a closed circle. The western way of viewing events is linear, an analytical, cause-and-effect, sequential way of explaining phenomena. Chinese essay paragraphs seem to have no direction, no starting point. They turn the topic around, treating it from

various tangential perspectives. To an English-speaking reader, Chinese compositions may seem incoherent. This is because the foreign student is using a rhetoric and a sequence of thoughts which violate the expectations of the native English reader. This is, of course, further complicated in the Western academic culture by the fact that each discipline is to some extent a sub-culture in itself. The writing rules and conventions within a discipline are often tacit, and learned by native students without conscious attention, thus producing a situation in which Australian university teachers cannot easily explain their own discipline-specific writing conventions. There are indications that Chinese students face a number of pitfalls. If they inappropriately personalise their writing, they run the risk of being classed as cognitively under-developed, still in Piaget's egocentric stage. (Lunsford 1980). They may utilise an excessive amount of hyperbole and allusion, and devices valued in Chinese writing, but not tolerated in English academic writing. They may misunderstand the conventions relating to quotation. Chinese students often include large pieces of text as if they were their own words. In western cultures, this is regarded as plagiarism; however, in both Chinese and Japanese culture, it is seen as a great compliment to the writer to use their words.

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It is wrong to assume that just because a student can write an excellent essay in his or her own language, or because he or she is competent in spoken or written English, that he or she will be able to write an academic essay acceptable to the English-speaking university community. In Asian universities, students write English essays either for non-native English teachers, who have the same cultural repertoire as the students themselves, or for experienced native-English teachers who have already been somewhat initiated into the Asian cultural norms for academic discourse, and who do not see the difficulties as cultural ones but rather as grammatical or syntactical ones. Professional translators are well aware of the problems, realizing that it may be necessary to re-shape the original quite radially. Their intention is not to pass judgment on these texts in terms of their effectiveness as English compositions, but rather to reconstruct them for optimal communication, both linguistically and culturally.

Recognising the Problems - Looking for Solutions

A study by Katherine Samuelowicz of the University of Queensland compares academics' perceptions of overseas students' learning problems with the students' own perceptions of their problems. English language problems are easy to notice, and often mask more important problems. The students' perception of the language problems were similar to those of the academic staff: over 52% of the students surveyed ranked language difficulties as very important. But on the perception of other problems there were significant divergences: 36% of students registered adjusting to a new educational system as a difficulty; 35% registered adjusting to the Australian culture as a difficulty. In contrast, academic staff rated these questions lowest.

Overseas students want and need help in their own countries prior to coming to Australia. It is important that language and study skills advisers working in Asian countries be aware that an important part of their work is to help students to broaden their conceptions of learning, of cognitive styles, of knowledge, and of communication conventions. Students also expect help at the Australian end in getting into the western *modus operandi* when they first arrive at their new university. Some of the assistance necessary for coming to terms with new cultural norms can be built into both the content and pedagogic processes of the course work that they have come to do. It is important for Australian educators to recognise that to encourage a deep, holistic approach to learning, they might need to modify learning contexts and do some explicit developmental work on both students' conceptions and routines of study.

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