

CORRECTNESS

When I first started teaching, the grammar and vocabulary idiosyncrasies of second language (L2) writers were actually called "illiteracies." In other words, if L2 English learners made grammar and vocabulary errors, no matter how competent they were in their own languages, they were, for some, illiterate. These days most trained teachers of L2 academic literacy think of the language varieties of L2 writers either as interlanguage forms (Selinker, 1972; i.e., intermediate grammars that are systematic and rule-governed but exhibit features unlike target language features) or as a type of *contact variety* of English, a term that comes from studies of pidgins and creoles and refers to mediating language forms that develop when people who do not speak each other's languages attempt to communicate.

Whatever such forms are called, questions of correctness do arise, if only in terms of whether or not the contact language forms are comprehensible to the members of an academically literate community. These issues of correctness arise not just in terms of producing text but also in interpreting text. How "correct" does a reading have to be to qualify as an instantiation of academic literacy in an L2? Peirce and Stein (1995) recount a striking case of conflicting instantiations of English academic literacy. A group of Black South African high school students whose first language (L1) was not English were asked to participate in piloting a text to be used in an English language proficiency test for university admissions. The text was based on a newspaper story about a group of 80 monkeys, four of whom were shot in the effort to stop their wild rampage against a home in Durban, where they attacked a boy, two policemen, and the house itself. (The monkeys had apparently become enraged at the entrapment of a mother monkey and her baby.) As one of the White LI English authors explained, she and her colleagues took the text to be "a simple factual report" about this incident with monkeys in Durban. The Black high school students doing the pilot test, however, regarded the text as racist, one of them interpreting the passage as being "about Black people, who are the 'monkeys' on the rampage" in White people's homes" (p. 56). Another said "It's about who owns the land—the monkeys think the land belongs to them but the Whites think they own the land" (p. 56). Although the text was withdrawn as a test item, these students, who hoped eventually to be admitted to the university, were obviously not participants in the same interpretive community as the White test makers. Had the piloting not occurred, the students' "misinterpretation" may well have been read as a simple lack of L2 English academic literacy.

But the issue of correct interpretation can arise at the most basic level. For example, in responding to one student's text written under some time constraints in a composition class, I wrote something like "It's too bad you didn't have more time to finish." He was mortified because as he understood it, I was telling him his paper was bad, "too bad." When issues of correctness and comprehensibility arise, the question becomes, how correct does something have to be to be comprehensible? How distant and unlikely can an interpretive frame

Ilona Leki

Meaning and Development of Academic Literacy in a Second Language

As English continues to expand into a global language (Kachru, 1992; Pennycook, 1994), English learners worldwide experience pressure to develop literacy in English, often a high level of academic/literacy. Yet, book titles such as *The Violence of Literacy* (Struckey, 1991) and references to literacy as genocidal (Purcell-Gates, 1998) point to a growing recognition that literacy is neither innocent nor unproblematic. The potential negative consequences of enforced literacy described by these writers hold ethical implications for those of us involved in English literacy development and require us to examine the issues raised by second- (or third- or fourth-) language literacy and to become more fully aware of the complexity of the enterprise. This complexity entails differing conceptions of the meaning and role of literacy across cultures. It is my hope that such a cross-cultural approach to thinking about literacy will help to engender sympathy and respect for learners of English as an additional language by promoting a better understanding of the task they face in acquiring English academic literacy.

Even from the perspective only of native language literacy (Street, 1995), it is clear that literacy, certainly including academic literacy, is not a single, unitary form, unitary skill and that literacy can be properly understood only from the perspective of a social context and not as the possession or personal cognitive ability of a single individual. If literacy is neither a unitary skill nor a personal possession independent of context, then what it means to be academically literate necessarily varies from one culture to the next. Being academically literate are in Chinese, for example, means, among other things, having knowledge of thousands of characters and enough familiarity with the works of writers of antiquity to be able to quote them without hesitation in certain contexts. This concept of academic literacy is not the same for English. Attempting to move across cultures and languages into new literacies, academic or otherwise, complicates literacy acquisition qualitatively.

This chapter examines four of the complicating issues raised by the development of academic literacy in English as a second language (ESL): correctness, range, identity, and discourse community values.

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be and still qualify as a literate reading in L2? How closely does the reading and writing of an L2 English learner have to match that of other members of an L1 English literate culture, including in terms of grammatical accuracy, and what are the consequences when the mismatch leads to misunderstanding?

RANGE

Range of literate abilities is also a very important issue for L2 English students. Normally, we would probably associate academic literacy with the ability to use and produce texts in a fairly wide range of general academic contexts. This is the meaning of academic literacy that undergirds the undergraduate general education curriculum. But with L2 learners once again we may need a different perspective. For example, one of the participants (Yang) in a research project of mine majored in nursing. Although she was trained as a physician and practiced medicine in the People's Republic of China, when she came to the United States, she was in her middle 30s and had not really studied English beyond high school. She had a great deal of difficulty making herself understood orally and produced contact variety writing. In fact, the first report she wrote for a nursing class was simply returned to her as unacceptable because of the problems her professor noted in language. Yang's general extemporaneous written work never really got much better in the three years of her nursing program, but she eventually graduated with a solid B average because all of her exams in the nursing program were multiple choice; whenever she had to write a paper she always made use of the writing center and of her husband's and her young adolescent daughter's better command of grammar and vocabulary to screen the paper before she turned it in; and much of the writing required of her at the university was in the form of nursing care plans that are written in symbols and abbreviations as incomprehensible to most English users as a foreign language. In sum, the range of her academic literacy was quite narrow although I believe no one would challenge its depth within her field of expertise. Nevertheless, her L2 academic literacy, one that is so narrow and so dependent, again pushes at the margins of what it means to have L2 academic literacy.

IDENTITY ISSUES

Issues of identity arise to some degree in any language learning situation, but the poignancy of the issues are seen most clearly through the example of Fan Shen (1989), whose frequently quoted article appeared in *College Composition and Communication*. As Shen explained, he was a Chinese graduate student studying American literature and having trouble with his writing. His professor told him to stop worrying about being so academic in his writing and to just be himself. That advice made Shen realize that he could not in fact be himself in English because when he was himself, he was Chinese, and when his real Chi-

nese self wrote something, it was not what his American professors were looking for. In order to write what they expected of him, he had to create and pretend to be a different self, an English-speaking self, one that did not mind arrogantly writing in the first person, one who put himself forward as having himself thought up these ideas he wrote and defended, rather than his Chinese self who did not write in the first person and whose native rhetoric required him to look to the authority of other writers and credit them with the ideas he wrote about. He had to pretend to be self-confident and assertive instead of circumspect, tentative, and suggestive as he really was. He managed, but only by becoming someone else, by creating an alter ego, a bold self-centered English-speaking person. Asking that someone create an alter ego is quite a lot to ask in the name of English academic literacy development. Why was it not possible for Shen to remain a Chinese person in his English writing?

Shen was a graduate student and possibly a visa student. That is, enough of his emotional and intellectual development had already taken place in Chinese so that he was able to resist the English assault against his Chinese self productively. The tension between identity and the development of L2 academic literacy presents an even more problematic and painful set of issues for younger students, particularly those who come to the United States as permanent residents. First, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), a concept proposed by Cummins (1979), develops somewhat independently from what Cummins called Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). In other words, although permanent resident students may be quite capable of handling their real-world communicative needs, including everyday reading and writing needs, that proficiency is of a different nature from the kinds of proficiency needed to succeed in academically oriented tasks. CALP takes a relatively long time to develop, long enough so that permanent resident students entering English medium high schools may in fact get to graduation before having developed academic proficiency in English (Collier, 1987). Bisher (1998) further suggests that this situation is exacerbated for refugee students, whose education may be interrupted by stays in refugee camps en route to permanent residences; to complicate matters, these students may not be academically literate in their first language (Fu, 1995; for a less academic perspective on these issues, see also Fadiman, 1997).

When permanent resident students enter college, we sometimes witness the sad and frustrating result of the educational system's response to these students, who communicate well in the everyday world but whose academic literacy is less well developed. In moving and eye-opening research on L2 students' experiences in the transition between high school and college, Harklau (2000) explored the situation of a small group of permanent resident students whose identities were in effect constructed for them by their teachers and classmates in high school, identities that they embraced. The four whom Harklau studied were considered top students in their high schools because they always did their homework as required, they tried hard academically and seemed to think education was important and teachers were to be respected, and they behaved well in class, so unlike native U.S. students with their disregard for schooling,

as their teachers said. These L2 students' teachers in high school praised them to the domestic students as models, pointing out how they obviously valued education despite their language "handicaps." With their first semester in college, however, their identities were reconstructed, not as model students, but first and foremost as ESL students, as students who had to be separated out from the other graduates of U.S. high schools because their proficiency in English (presumably in writing) was judged to be insufficient to allow them to take mainstream freshman writing classes. This reinterpretation of their identities was an embarrassment and a humiliation for these students, who had up to this point been taking all their high school classes with the U.S. students; they dressed like them, liked the same entertainments, lived like U.S. teenagers, and had been praised for their efforts in high school despite their language problems. They had become fully invested in their English-speaking identities. Now, after all this time succeeding in English, they were redefined, in the name of academic literacy, as failures in English, not primarily as model students but as ESL students.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE COMMUNITY VALUES

At least in part, the development of academic literacy entails sharing the values of an academic discourse community, including subscribing to its expressed or tacit assumptions about what it means to be academically literate, that is, what it means to be one of the members of the literary club, as Smith (1988) said. The academic discourse community in this U.S. culture currently values, among other things, critical thinking, developing "voice," and avoiding plagiarism. It might be useful to examine these values by first looking at different conceptions of what academic literacy means and how it is acquired in different cultures in order to make the point that beliefs about and attitudes toward literacy themselves form a part of literacy and that the acquisition of academic literacy in an L2 can be impeded by clashing culture-bound, often implicitly held values. The point of such an examination is to problematize these values as local and historical rather than universal and eternal. This critique then is intended to underscore the status of L1 English academic values as contingent and so to work against the colonizing of other literacies and concomitant devaluation of the literacy knowledge and practices of L2 English learners.

Although the research exists (see, e.g., Street, 1993), we in the United States have not focused much on research on cross-cultural academic literacy besides the large volume of work on contrastive rhetoric, which is fairly limited in scope, dealing mainly with patterns of text structure, not with values, beliefs, attitudes toward, or development of academic literacy (see also, Carson, 1992). One possible insight from contrastive rhetoric that moves beyond organizational issues appears in the often cited, although perhaps somewhat controversial, work by Hinds (1987) on Reader- and Writer-Responsible text. From his analyses of texts in Japanese and English, Hinds concluded that in some cultures, such as the

United States, the burden of communication falls on the writer. That is, it is the writer's responsibility to make the meaning of a text as transparent as possible for the reader by explicitly explaining what the main point of the text is, how the text is divided, how various parts of the text are related to each other. On the other hand, other cultures prefer Reader-Responsible writing. In this case, it is the reader's responsibility to read between the lines, to intuit the meaning the writer only hints at, to see through disparate parts of the text to their underlying unity. If in fact such cultural preferences exist, it is easy to see why a highly literate reader and writer from a Reader-Responsible academic culture would have some difficulty seeing the value of and thus being willing to take on the habits and preferences of someone from a Writer-Responsible culture, and vice versa. In other words, if Hinds's studies hold up, U.S. reader/writers might find Japanese writing diffuse, suggestive, but unclear; Japanese reader/writers might find U.S. writing lockstep, simplistic, overly specified.

In addition to studying texts across cultures in an attempt to understand the nature of academic literacy, we might look cross-culturally at literacy training. In describing literacy training and practices in Korea, Lee and Scarcella (1992) noted that in grammar school Korean children are encouraged to keep daily journals that are collected once a week though not graded or corrected, that children are regularly asked to write to commemorate special occasions, and that many urban Korean families with children subscribe to special daily newspapers for children that report world, national, and local news, among other things. As adults, Koreans particularly appreciate poetry and short fiction. In fact, Lee and Scarcella reported that Koreans are, amazingly, accustomed to constructing poems on the spot. They refer to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* from 1988 that described a radio talk show host in Korea going out onto the street and randomly asking people to construct poems to express their opinions on the then current government corruption scandal.

However, although the Korean "person on the street" reported on in the article seems able and willing to create poetry, essay writing is not taught in schools and so not practiced much, with the general public apparently feeling, according to these authors, that only experts in a subject area are qualified to write essays on that topic. They also report the comments of a Korean university student who claims that the really good Korean writers spend a great deal of time planning what they will write, gathering their thoughts, and so once an essay is written, writers are unlikely to be inclined to spend time revising it. By contrast, the U.S. literate community seems to hold strong beliefs about the value of revising. Ability and willingness to revise practically define U.S. notions of expertise in writing.

Moving to China for a glimpse of other ways with words, we learn from Kohn (1992) something about reading instruction in the PRC. In Chinese reading classes, children are taught to read slowly and be sure they know each word before moving on; to reread difficult sentences until the meaning is clear; to look up definitions of all unknown words in a dictionary. As Kohn points out, this list of dos and don'ts is almost exactly the opposite of what current reading

instruction theory recommends in this country, particularly in the instruction of L2 reading, where learners are encouraged to read fast to get the gist; use background knowledge to guess meaning; focus on main ideas, not details; and guess the meanings of unknown words instead of looking them up right away.

Clearly, attitudes and beliefs about academic literacy and literacy acquisition differ across cultures. With these differences as a backdrop, we might now turn to some of the values and beliefs that undergird academic literacy practices in this culture. One of the currently most pervasive and highly prized stances before text in this culture is that required for critical thinking. Critical thinking appears to mean approaching text with a combination of skepticism and analysis. It also appears to be taken for granted that critical thinking represents a universal good, and it is sometimes argued that for students from countries that value rote memorization in education (with all the negative connotations this term indexes), critical thinking is a skill or attitude that is especially important to teach to L2 students, suggesting that they in particular, because of their educational backgrounds, lack the ability to take such an approach. It is also only recently that writing researchers are finally beginning to examine critical thinking with a bit of critical distance.

Atkinson (1997) links the notion of critical thinking with the glorification of individualism, standing alone against the crowd or against the received wisdom of a particular text. He points out that not all countries have this obsession with the power and importance of the individual above the group that undergirds current notions of critical thinking, and so we should be clear that this notion of critical thinking is culture bound, preferred by some academically literate communities as a way of approaching text at this particular time. It is neither a universal value nor an expression of the universal good. Atkinson's analysis is important for those of us who deal with students who come from cultures where the proper approach to a text is not a critical approach, from cultures that encourage a less individualistic stance before text. His discussion reminds us of the arrogance of believing that, because at this moment in time we feel that a critical approach works well for us, we must require it of every student that comes our way, not as an option but as the only appropriate form of intellectual engagement.

But perhaps more important to remember is that, although the U.S. academic discourse community currently finds the critical thinking approach to text useful and other cultures may find this approach to text less interesting, useful, or appropriate for whatever reason, not adopting a critical thinking stance before a text in an educational context cannot be equated with an inability to think critically. It would in fact be ludicrous to make such an assumption. After all, what culture, what part of the world does not at one time or another witness the political unrest and/or protest that can be one of the consequences of thinking critically, analytically, skeptically? Certainly, L2 English students can and do think critically, without our help, and very often their critical thinking is directed at the United States, at what we do here in general and at what

Critical thinking on "universal value" culture bound, not a

we do in our classes in particular. Those who despair that these students are not critical enough need to have more conversations with them. But approaching a text, especially certain kinds of texts, with a primary view to finding fault with it may simply not be an appropriate stance to take before a text, at least not certain texts and perhaps not in an initial encounter. What might those certain texts be? They might easily be religious texts, but they might well also be academic texts in academic settings, especially on subjects the students do not know much about, and most especially on subjects related to a culture that is not their own (see, e.g., Johns, 1991).

Like critical thinking, another value associated in this culture with academic literacy and taught in writing classes, although mentioned only rarely in disciplinary courses across the curriculum, is the development of an authorial voice. An apparent goal of writing classes in this culture is the development of a sense of individual difference: to set oneself apart from the others, to be unlike other writers, to let individual voices stand out and be heard. Such a stance is open to the criticism, in a post-structuralist context, that it emphasizes to students the discredited notion of the unified, autonomous subjectivity, posits the notion as natural and universal rather than constructed and determined, and thus casts as unnatural anyone for whom such an emphasis on individualism is not automatic.

In addition to reemphasizing our heavy bias toward individualism, the notion of voice appears to be associated, at least to some degree, with a willingness to self-disclose and herein lies another potential problem for L2 writing development. On one hand, not all cultures encourage young people to self-disclose in classrooms, to talk about their personal experiences and opinions; that simply is not what school is for. And on the other hand, in other educational systems, that kind of self-disclosure may in fact be considered very appropriate but exclusively for schoolchildren, not for adults at a university, who would be expected to be able to exercise self-control and to find ways to self-disclose among their family and friends, not in a classroom.

In other words, while English writing teachers value voice in student writing, it too must be considered contingent, valued in a particular time and place, but not an essential component of academic literacy and so perhaps not worth hammering on too much in L2 reading/writing classes. (For further discussion of voice in L2 writing, see the special issue on voice in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Belcher & Hirvela, 2001.)

And finally, plagiarism. Although critical thinking and voice are relative newcomers to the list of qualities that writers are currently being encouraged to exhibit, the nearly absolute requirement to avoid plagiarism has been around much longer. But not forever. Strictures against plagiarism are neither universal nor ahistorical; they appear to have begun in the English-speaking world during the Renaissance and for specific historical reasons. Pennycook (1996) traces the history of plagiarism in the West and helps us to put into perspective this currently greatest of literacy sins. The reason it is important to see plagiarism as a notion limited to a particular time and place is to blunt the hysteria

It is this critical thinking? is that authorial voice

developing an authorial voice

maybe likely to plagiarize by wanting to copy text word for word. As we see in Bell's example, it is difficult to understand cross-cultural literacies without first examining the assumptions of our own L1 literacy and then being willing to challenge or suspend the values tied to it.

The question of academic discourse communities finally presents itself to L2 literacy teachers in two forms. First, if beliefs and attitudes about L1 literacy and about the acquisition of L1 literacy inform approaches and attitudes toward L2 literacy acquisition, L2 literacy teachers need to do more to understand the kinds of literacy expectations and attitudes students bring with them from their families and their home cultures and to build on those expectations. Remaining ignorant of other cultures' approaches to literacy may cause us to misunderstand our students' actions and motivations and to misinterpret the causes of obstacles they may be experiencing in acquiring L2 literacy. Second, L2 reading/writing teachers need to think/long and hard about our own academic discourse community. What is it? Specifically, what community do we belong to? As we introduce L2 students to academic literacy, whose discourse community are we representing to them? In the course of doing research on professors' expectations about writing across disciplines, I learned that in our College of Agriculture, before turning in papers to their professors, students are asked to run a computer check of the length of each of the sentences in their reports. The computers therefore programmed to flag any sentences longer than 21 words. I was stunned to learn this. In my L2 writing classes I encouraged students to try to combine short sentences into longer ones, telling them, as I believe, that in English we tend to value embedding at the sentence level; complex sentences lend an air of maturity to writing. Apparently, however, this belief is not shared in the discourse community of the College of Agriculture. There, longer sentences are discouraged as more likely to be confusing than short sentences. Whose discourse community was I representing in what I was teaching my students, my L2 English students who are in college to study engineering, business, agriculture, computer science, math, biology? Clearly, I was representing the English department's discourse community to my students as the very holder of the meaning of what it is to be literate—the English department, the academic discourse community that is the most likely to assign essays to write rather than reports, the one that values personal disclosure to develop a writer's voice, the one that encourages, even requires, students to express personal opinions on topics they may know very little about, the one literacy community that my L2 English students are the very least likely to want to join. I would argue that it is important to keep reminding ourselves that different communities value different aspects of reading and writing, and English department literacy values are not universal and do not define literacy in general. This knowledge, however, puts L2 reading/writing teachers in the odd and conflicted situation of trying to introduce L2 English students to literacy communities we ourselves do not belong to and of belonging to a community they have no reason to be introduced to.

In view of the place of English in the world today and the role it sometimes

plays in both empowering and dramatically constraining the lives and futures of people from different L1 backgrounds, I feel an interrogation of the characteristics of L1 English literacy and its place among the other literacies in the world is a task that L1 English literates are morally and ethically obliged to undertake. Given how complex literacy issues in second, third, or fourth languages can become, perhaps the only reasonable stance to take, at least initially, is one of modest flexibility and willingness to learn from others, one in which "You do a lot of observing and then you think about it."

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Paul Kei Matsuda

The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition

In "English Only and U.S. College Composition," Bruce Horner and John Trimbur identify the tacit policy of unidirectional English monolingualism, which makes moving students toward the dominant variety of English the only conceivable way of dealing with language issues in composition instruction. This policy of unidirectional monolingualism is an important concept to critique because it accounts for the relative lack of attention to multilingualism in composition scholarship. Yet it does not seem to explain why second-language issues have not become a central concern in composition studies. After all, if U.S. composition had accepted the policy of unidirectional monolingualism, *all* composition teachers would have been expected to learn how to teach the dominant variety of English to students who come from different language backgrounds. This has not been the case. While Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva argue that coursework on language issues (though certainly not a monolingualist approach) should be part of every English teacher's professional preparation (4), relatively few graduate programs in composition studies offer courses on those issues, and even fewer require such courses. As a result, the vast majority of U.S. college composition programs remain unprepared for second-language writers who enroll in the mainstream composition courses. To account for this situation, I want to take Horner and Trimbur's argument a step further and suggest that the dominant discourse of U.S. college composition not only has accepted English Only as an ideal but it already assumes the state of English Only, in which students are native English speakers by default.

That second-language writing has not yet become a central concern in composition studies seems paradoxical given the historical origin of U.S. college composition as a way of "containing" language differences and sealing them off from the rest of U.S. higher education. Robert J. Connors has suggested that U.S. composition arose in response to perceived language differences — texts written by ostensibly some of the brightest native English speakers that included numerous errors in "[p]unctuation, capitalization, spelling, [and] syntax" (*Composition* 128). Susan Miller also points out that college composition "has provided a continuing way to separate the unpredestined from those who belong [...] by encouraging them to leave school, or more vaguely, by convincing large numbers of *native speakers* and otherwise accomplished *citizens* that they are 'not good at English'" (74; emphasis added). To a large extent, however, issues that prompted