Cultural Negotiation About Doing Research

Linell DAVIS
Nanjing Normal University

When participants in different cultures come together they create dynamic sites of exchange and negotiation. These contact zones, interstitial spaces or “third spaces” are problematic but creative places where meanings are created and recreated through discourse. In this paper the third space created in a post-graduate research writing class is investigated as a site where various beliefs about how to do research are negotiated. The participants, an American teacher and Chinese students, bring understandings of what research is and how to do it that they have gleaned from their prior educational experiences, academic disciplines, generational cohorts, and other social resources. Using data from student writing, class discussions and informal interviews, the author attempts to identify the multiple cultural influences on student beliefs and to show how differences are negotiated. The author hopes that exploring this topic will provide a useful model for carrying out cross-cultural research and will make a contribution to clarifying issues related to research paradigms in use in China.

Introduction

On the day in 2003 when I first met with members of the teaching staff of the English department, they gave me my teaching schedule for the term, which featured several sections of Oral English. At that moment I realized that none of the decision-makers had read my CV or if they had, it was not sufficient to alter the idea that foreign teachers are best utilized by presenting students with native speakers. My response was instantaneous. “I do not teach Oral English, but I do teach writing.” Within a day I had a new schedule that called for me to teach Advanced Writing to 78 first year MA students. That first negotiation went well, so I moved on to the next issue. “I will need two teaching assistants to help me with the course.” Again the negotiation went remarkably well. Within a couple of days I had met two young teachers, fresh from graduate study, who would work with me. I introduced them to the course I intended to teach, told them what work I required of them, and expressed my hope that the experience would be fruitful for them as well as for me. The negotiations were becoming more complex, but they still involved manageable issues such as classroom schedules, meeting times, and allocation of duties. The negotiations have been ongoing since that time, but gradually the issues became so subtle that I could no longer understand them simply in terms of differences between national cultures. Recently I have imagined myself as a resident of a complex cultural space that involves differences among generations of Chinese scholars, contestations among academic cultures and even a Kuhnian (Kuhn: 1970) paradigm shift.

Background of the Study

This paper reports on an informal study carried out over a period of four years. It is informed by my classroom teaching, interactions with students and teaching assistants, student writing, and by my reading in the fields of contrastive rhetoric (Connor:1996; Li: 1996, 2002), genre analysis (Swales: 1990), second language writing (Matsuda & Silva: 2005), and cognition and culture (Strauss & Quinn: 1997).
This study is concerned with the understanding of the concept “research” held by first year MA students in English. As a preliminary, it is necessary to discuss what I mean by meaning, and beyond that, what I take to be cultural meanings. Strauss and Quinn define meaning as “the interpretation evoked in a person by an object or event at a given time” and cultural meanings as typical interpretations that a group of people are likely to make of similar events (p. 82). In their view cultural meanings are relatively stable but dynamic, which implies that people’s constructions of the meaning of concepts may change as a result of new experiences. In teaching the advanced writing course I intend to influence the student’s construction of the concepts “academic writing” and “research.” This is consistent with Woods’ understanding of learning, which he defines as the process of changing interpretations as a result of new experiences (Woods: 2003).

The concept of the third space challenges the conventional view that cultures are bounded and separable. This idea originates with the literary and cultural critic Homi Bhabha (1994) who says that in our age of migration and modern communication technologies, we all live in spaces/places where cultures meet and interact. He calls these spaces “innovative sites of collaboration and contestation,” spaces where most of us, most of the time are negotiating differences. This idea coincides nicely with Strauss & Quinn’s argument that each person is a contact point for many overlapping, partially shared cultures. Bhabha’s concept of the third space has been taken up by theorists and researchers in various humanities and social science disciplines including communication, sociology, literature, and applied linguistics (Kramsch: 1993). The writing class is such a space.

The setting for the study is the course Advanced Writing for first year MA students. When I began teaching the course in September 2002, the course was required and it lasted for two semesters. Over the years the number of students admitted to the graduate program has risen dramatically. I managed by adding an additional section and another teaching assistant when enrollment went to 108 students. When it went to 140 the course was reduced to one semester and it was no longer required. At present there are nearly 200 first year MA students. I am currently teaching three sections of the course with 35 students in each section.

The textbook for the course is a new version of a writing textbook I wrote ten years ago (Davis; 1997, 2007). The new textbook incorporates changes in approaches to teaching academic writing, developments in information technologies, and my experience with the first edition.

**Research as Inquiry**

The conventional wisdom has it that Chinese students are relatively silent in class and are especially reluctant to ask questions until they can do so privately by approaching the teacher after the class has been dismissed. To me this is a serious failing of the Chinese educational system. In my opinion, research and research writing is based on inquiry and inquiry begins with asking questions. To encourage the students to ask questions I tell them at the beginning of the first class that I will only tell them a few facts about the writing course. To get the rest of the information they surely need, they will have to ask for it. After giving them a ten minute lecture on the process approach to writing, I stop and invite their questions. Some students get right to the core of the matter, asking me questions about the textbook, homework and my grading policy. Other students show their inexperience by asking vague, ritualistic questions about how
they can improve their writing or by asking social questions about how I like my life in China. I let this go on for a time, but finally I tell them that I am still waiting for the important questions such as what homework I am assigning for next week. While I am waiting for them to mobilize their dormant question-asking skills, I tell them that research is inquiry and that inquiry begins with questions, usually very practical questions rooted in their day-to-day life. They cannot wait for information to fall on them from the sky; they have to figure out how to get it.

This concept “research is inquiry” is also the focus of the second class during which we read a Chinese folktale. When we have finished the story, I ask the students to raise questions about it. They are usually slow getting started, but I keep after them, praising questions that they do ask and encouraging them to ask more. By the end of the activity the blackboard is full of questions, which the students conscientiously write down in their notebooks. I explain that this is a pre-writing strategy, questioning the text. The purpose of the activity is for each student to identify one question that he or she is motivated to try to answer. To answer it they scan their cultural knowledge and search for evidence from the story itself. The answer that they propose becomes the thesis for the essay that they write. In the end-of-course evaluation many students report that this activity was a revelation for them. It shows them that they can create their own topics by raising questions that interest them.

Later in the course, the students are asked to design an independent research project using pre-selected source materials. Their first assignment for the project is to hand in a single piece of paper on which they tell me the research topic, the research question, and their plan for answering the question. Despite the focus on “research is inquiry” that pervades the course, some students have difficulty formulating a research question. Approximately 20-40% of students write a thesis statement rather than a question. This suggests that in carrying out research, they believe that they should know the answers before they begin. In writing conferences and classroom workshop sessions, I challenge this belief in various ways. For instance, I might rephrase the assignment as, “Tell me what it is you want to discover in doing this research project.” If they seem prematurely committed to a thesis statement, I suggest that it is not a good idea to decide on an answer to a question before reading and analyzing the relevant source materials.

In planning this assignment, some students say that they intend to analyze the primary sources (stories) from the perspective of a particular theory. This tendency is particularly noticeable among the high-achieving students. This has prompted me to question them about their beliefs about the role of theory in doing research. Almost all of them tell me that their teachers tell them that research begins with theory. At that point I sometimes retell the story of Isaac Newton who observed an apple falling to the ground. He asked why objects fall in the way that they do and in asking this question about a phenomenon developed the theory of gravity. So, I argue, scientists do not begin with theory but with phenomena that they do not understand but want to understand. The students get the point, and perhaps my argument does play a role in destabilizing their schemas about “doing research,” but the “theory first” view of research is so widely practiced that I doubt that my argument has any lasting effect. Casual comments from colleagues and casual browsing of book store shelves indicate that “theory first” research is the norm among Chinese academics in English language-related fields.
Researcher as an Emerging Identity

To get the students to reflect on their future academic careers, I ask them to write an essay titled “Self-introduction as a researcher” to be handed in at the start of the second class. This assignment gives me a way to assess the students’ writing and to learn something about their writing and research experience and training. The students fall into two groups, recent recipients of BA degrees and returning teachers, but the groups are diverse. The recent graduates include those from English departments and other fields as well as a small number of self-study students. The frame of reference for research for this group is the graduation thesis. A few report a satisfying experience, but most confess that they only painstakingly compiled critical comments on a work from the Chinese canon of western literature. I have to agree with their assessments. The topics for their undergraduate theses tend to be both broad (symbolism in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn) and familiar (Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice). Few mention that they read the primary source in any detail (or in English), and most report that their effort was devoted to searching the critical literature, selecting, and organizing source materials. One teaching assistant tells me that her department requires that undergraduate theses include a minimum of twelve sources. This requirement does have the benefit of familiarizing students with library resources, but it does not help them much with their critical thinking skills. In their introductory essays no students mentioned that they became aware of differences in theoretical perspectives among the source authors they read, nor did anyone mention that their thesis supervisors required them to do a close reading of the primary source or write an argument in support of a thesis statement.

The recent BA graduates often comment on their image of a researcher. Some of the words and phrases they use to characterize researchers are “white-haired,” “serious,” “group of intellectuals gathering in a laboratory,” and “scientific.” These images suggest that the identity of a researcher is something distant that does not apply to them. Yet, they know that as graduate students they are expected to do research. The words that they use to express their attitudes about doing research include “not fun,” “not easy,” “torture,” “long difficult process,” “hard work,” and “very boring.” Several express the view that becoming a researcher requires gaining encyclopedic knowledge through reading many books and “having the right attitude.” None of the recent BA graduates mention that being a researcher requires curiosity about the world in which they live. I have not explored the question of what they think the right attitude is, but I suspect that it involves self-discipline, extensive reading over a period of years, and tolerance for tedious work that is not personally relevant. In this context it is with great joy that I read in their end-of-course evaluations that some students discover that research can be fun, satisfying and something they can do now. These comments show me that the course (in conjunction with other influences) helps them to construct positive identities as researchers.

The returning teachers have more diverse research experiences. Some have worked on projects organized by their departments and some have carried out classroom investigations of their teaching and their students. From them I hear about the pressure to publish to qualify for promotion and to avoid being fined by their schools.

I have written four articles. The first two articles were written for getting a professional title. The other two were written in order to fulfill the task my
college required me to do; otherwise I would be fined. I know these articles are of poor quality and even I do not want to read them again. - Returning teacher

These and other comments from students and colleagues over the years indicate to me that the focus in Chinese academic culture is on publishing rather than on doing research. Listening to what teachers say about their efforts to get articles published, I have learned that it usually involves paying money to publishers and gaining the sponsorship of influential teachers. In their talk they say a lot about quantity and little if anything about the quality of what they write. When I ask them about peer review or blind review, most are unfamiliar with these concepts. Teaching assistants and colleagues inform me that bonuses are paid depending on the prestige of journals in which they manage to get articles published. The returning teachers in the writing course, like my colleagues, experience a tension between their teaching duties and the expectation that they publish. To them, “teaching” and “doing research” are bounded and separate professional demands. From my experience with American higher education, I know that this tension also exists there, but mechanisms have been developed for managing it. For example, most pre-service teacher training programs require a practice-based research experience. Also, faculty selection in undergraduate programs stresses teaching competence, while graduate programs stress research competence. While formal credentialing is the same for both, American academics expect to find master teachers in undergraduate programs and master researchers in graduate programs.

When I suggest to students that they might try resolving the tension between teaching and research by bringing the two closer together, I am usually told that publishers want more “scientific” articles. Practitioner and classroom-based research are not prestigious. I have questioned many students about what they mean by “scientific” and what I hear is that it implies objectivity, using theories to form propositions and then testing them, contributing to the development of universal knowledge, etc. Their associations with the concept “scientific” show that consciously or tacitly, they subscribe to the positivist view of research that gained ascendancy in the natural sciences in the last century. While most students have heard about theories of social construction, they do not believe that they or other people construct knowledge. Sometimes I appeal to their cultural pride by pointing out that the split between subject and object that is at the root of the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity is a western thing, not very Chinese, not something that Laozi or Confucius would subscribe to. Few if any students understand my philosophical attempt to influence their beliefs about research. Their observation that positivist scientific research enjoys the highest prestige in their culture is far more salient. This may be because the social sciences were neglected while the natural sciences were advanced during the period that China was cut off from outside influences. So when I hear students talk about doing research it sounds similar to what western academics were saying in the mid-twentieth century. They know nothing of the paradigm wars that I lived through as an American academic during the last third of the twentieth century.

This cultural lag is forgivable; what bothers me more is the distortion of commercial values implicit in the idea of paying to have something published. I admit to being appalled when people suggested that I pay a publisher to publish my intercultural communication book (Davis: 1999). To my mind, publishers want to make money, so if I write a book that is appealing to an
audience of book buyers, they will happily pay me for what I write. My strongly held-beliefs about readers leads me to negotiate yet another issue with the students.

**Writing for Members of a Discourse Community**

I find that most students’ writing instruction has been dominated by the three-point essay that is required for standardized exams such as TEM 4 and TEM 8. As a result, at the beginning of the course students tend to write for a teacher/evaluator. Most of them have not learned that it is necessary to write with a communicative purpose and for an audience of imagined readers. I negotiate their beliefs about readers by raising questions on the drafts of essays they write. Who are your readers? What benefit are you giving to your readers? How does your introduction attract the attention of readers? How familiar are your readers with your topic?

It does not take long for the students to grasp this first principle of reader-sensitivity. Some students, however, reveal their “internalized cultural meanings” (Strauss & Quinn) about academic writing as they go on to write more explicitly academic essays. Many, if not most, believe that in writing for an academic audience they should display their scholarship. They attempt to “sound scholarly” by decorating their essays with literary quotations, using specialized terms they get from reading critical source materials, and by constructing long, noun-heavy sentences in passive voice. When I say in feedback sessions in which I comment on their essays that they should strive for clarity in their writing, many students express surprise. I tell them that writing in active voice with strong verbs helps readers move through the essay, while constructing noun-heavy sentences with weak verbs makes reading tedious. I have learned that many students concurrently take a course in cognitive semantics, so I ask them to study the writing style in Lakoff & Johnson’s Metaphors We Live By. They readily acknowledge that this is an especially influential academic book, so I point out that the language in the book is accessible to general readers, that many of the sentences and paragraphs are short, and that the authors write in a personal voice. The inspiration for this recommendation comes from Swales (1990) who recommends that writers read and analyze works in the genre they seek to emulate.

While negotiating the belief that “academic writing is display,” I have gradually formed ideas about the sources of that belief. Because the students are learning English as a second language, teachers have paid more attention to their linguistic proficiency than to the content of what they write. This has encouraged them to write in ways that demonstrate their ability to use rarely used verb tenses and complex grammatical constructions. Simplicity and clarity have not been supported by their previous English instructors. Another influence, it appears, is the more general hierarchical tendency in Chinese academic culture. Students expect that if they can write in a way that shows that they are learned, then they can rise to positions of prestige in the culture. They may also be imitating forms that prestigious academics are imitating that they, in turn, acquired from professional writing in the western positivist research paradigm. In this type of research writing, the researcher is constructed as an objective observer who has little or no influence on what is observed. This construction of the researcher forbids the use of personal pronouns such as “I” or “you” and encourages the use of passive voice.

This analysis suggests that students are writing for members of a discourse community, but that discourse community is local (the immediate Chinese academic culture) rather than international (the global community of scholars in a specific field).
Conclusions

Readers might be surprised that I have not commented on the problem of plagiarism in a paper on teaching academic writing to Chinese students. That is a problem for students when they begin the writing course, but I have confidence in the strategies I have devised to deal with it. Students do say that one benefit of the writing course is that they learn the proper ways to document sources in their academic writing. Probably if I had written this paper five years ago, that issue would have been in the foreground. In my experience, it is not that difficult to invent teaching strategies to deal with problems that are so obvious, but I do know that teachers who have recently arrived from western countries often take a moral rather than a technical stance on the issue of documenting sources. For many western academics, plagiarism is an ethical issue. That attitude supposes that students know the rules, but deliberately choose to violate them. My experience has taught me that that is not the case. Students want to write properly, but they do not know how, so I teach them how to do it. They and I are generally satisfied with the results.

In recent years I have become interested in problems that I consider to be more cultural rather than technical. To use a popular image from cross-cultural study, these are issues from the part of the cultural iceberg that is submerged under the surface of the water, issues that are out-of-awareness. My attention has been directed toward the students’ “internalized cultural meanings” (Strauss & Quinn: 1997) of concepts related to research and academic writing. In teaching I attempt to raise the cultural iceberg by commenting on and sometimes disputing these tacit cultural meanings. In other words, I seek to negotiate the meanings of these concepts. My intention in doing so is to learn more about the culture(s) in which I live and work and to help the students to construct schemas that will serve them well in their teaching and research careers. I admit that I do not like the idea that students attach much negative baggage to an activity that I find deeply satisfying. Trying to change that is my way of wishing them well.

References


