

**WEST MEETS EAST:
A TEACHER EDUCATOR NEGOTIATES THE EDUCATIONAL DIVIDE**

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Abstract: *This paper highlights the significant strategies and approaches found effective in teaching English writing to Chinese doctoral students at Peking University (PKU) during the academic year 2011-12. In this study, a veteran American teacher educator aligned her instruction with student-centered methods rather than with the traditional teacher-centered instruction of China. Despite the many differences in cultural and educational approaches between the United States and China, PKU students responded well to the constructivist practices introduced to them. Inquiry, peer response, and self-reflection enabled students to take ownership in their learning and discover their voices in writing that was meaningful for them. This study illustrates how best practices can be tailored to the context and needs of both students and teachers. Such practices are adaptable across cultures, providing bridges between educational systems that may be politically and philosophical contradictory.*

Key words: constructivism, student-centered practices, writing, China, English learners

Introduction

The profession of teacher education demands that we keep current about the research on best practices. Yet how many of us are given the opportunity to examine and confirm those practices in a country and culture so different from our own? Furthermore, are the practices we consider best for our own educational settings universally applicable?

Teaching English in Beijing at Peking University (PKU) for the academic year 2011-12 reconfirmed much of what I know about effective teaching while also challenging some of my preferred practices. Hired as an expert foreign English teacher with American proclivities, I was expected to provide my Beijing students with an Americanized educational experience. That expectation gave me permission to instruct as I preferred with the hope my students would be able to adjust their learning styles to my instructional style. However, foundational to effective teaching is utilizing students' learning preferences in order to help them succeed. Negotiating the territory between my entrenched way of teaching and their

accustomed ways of learning would be critical if we were to have a successful year.

Three practices in particular provided a framework to negotiate our differences: (a) learning to construct knowledge together (Brooks & Brooks, 1999), (b) adopting a strategic approach to language acquisition (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2013), and (c) inviting personal connections with the reading and writing we pursued (Olson, 2010). However, none of these practices was familiar to my Chinese students. Such pedagogy was, in fact, the antithesis of their experiences of what happens in classrooms and the roles we assume as teachers and students. The first few weeks of my teaching would prove important in establishing routines and methods suitable and acceptable to all of us.

**Western Constructivism Meets Eastern
Traditionalism**

Over the thirty years of being a teacher educator, I have come to appreciate "isms" that help define what I philosophically value and try to put into practice. One of

these is "constructivism," a term used to describe one theory of how we learn: we consider what we think we know in light of new knowledge gained via inquiry, discovery, application, and reflection. In a constructivist classroom, the teacher facilitates students' exploration of ideas, theories, concepts, and texts by guiding questions or posing problems for consideration. Together as a community of learners, teacher and students "construct" possible scenarios, solutions, or perhaps more questions that enlarge their initial understanding or that clarify previously held misconceptions. The classroom becomes a lab where the process of learning itself is examined and multiple viewpoints considered. Student input and inquiry are not only invited and valued, but expected (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

In preparing to teach at PKU, I wondered how such an "ism" might play out at a prestigious Chinese university with China's most outstanding graduate students, educated entirely by direct instruction, teacher-dominated discourse, and rote-learning. They were masters of memorization, recitation, test-taking, and following their teacher's every word (Vernezze, 2011). Perfecting these behaviors had given them access to the "Harvard" of Chinese universities. Although highly literate and intelligent, these students would be unaccustomed to asking questions of their professor and reticent of sharing their thinking with peers. Was it possible to create a student-centered classroom with pupils so unfamiliar with this model? What would be their response, and what adjustments would I have to make to my teaching?

To prevent a hostile take-over (either mine or my students'), I reviewed what I know about initiating a non-threatening climate for learning: find out what students already know and can do and "seek to understand before being understood" (Covey, 2004).

With the aim to establish trust and mutual regard, two essential characteristics of a constructivist classroom, I used the following methods the first day of class:

A PowerPoint presentation. What? In a student-centered classroom? It seems anathema to the goals of interaction and mutual exchange. In truth, I have never been a PowerPoint instructor. However, my Chinese students were expecting a formal presentation. I could use their expectation to my benefit. The PowerPoint would be an acceptable medium to them, and I could use it effectively to introduce less familiar interactive activities (note: I would continue to use a weekly PowerPoint that was both informative and interactive. Students appreciated being able to see and read the English I was speaking and to review posted PowerPoints after class; this medium proved effective on many levels).

Through that first PowerPoint, I introduced myself by way of five personal statements that I hoped would bridge our cultural differences: (a) I was born and raised in the state of Utah, home of the 2002 Winter Olympics; (b) I married my husband five weeks after our first date; (c) We have four children (all sons!) and eight grandchildren (all boys!); (d) This is my first time in China; (e) I love fresh chrysanthemum tea. These statements helped us connect through shared values (the Olympics, marriage, sons, tea). Students had to guess which statements were true and which were false. Once they had written their assumptions, I showed pictures of my state, home, family (two sons & two daughters), my first trip to China, and me drinking herbal tea. Through these pictures, students verified the truthfulness (or not) of my statements. My self-disclosures also modeled their first in-class writing assignment. In small groups of four and using English as much as possible, students wrote and shared their own five statements and peers guessed

which ones were true or not. There was a lot of laughing and smiles as students exchanged their statements. But more than a successful ice-breaker, the activity established the behaviors of a constructivist classroom – student participation, inquiry, sharing, and mutual regard. In addition, students wrote enough English for me to pre-assess their ability to write clear sentences about information they already knew.

A student survey. Surveying students upfront has many advantages if designed purposefully. The data from all 140 of my students provided information about where and how they practiced their English, if they were currently using their English in their research studies, what fears they had about taking an English class from an American, and what genres they were interested in writing. I summarized the data and shared the results with them the next week. Thus began their sense of how I would use their input to decide goals and strategies based on this background information.

A timed writing exercise. I initiated the first exercise we would practice each session – a non-graded, timed quick write or free-write (Elbow, 1998). Such writings develop fluency because students must keep pens moving the entire time (usually 7-8 minutes) without stopping to correct a word or consult their electronic dictionaries. For each quick write I offered several topics to choose from in order to encourage self-selection. I discovered that having choices to write about was not an aspect of my students' past writing experiences, so students initially struggled with options. Quick writes would also become the vehicle for sharing and improving reading fluency as well as initiating discussion. Danling Fu, a native Chinese speaker and ELL professor at the University of Florida, concurs that starting with writing as a means to develop reading and speaking

fluency is an effective way to improve these three skills in language acquisition (Beers, Probst, & Reif, 2007, p. 119). However, these initial quick writes were difficult and frustrating for my students who had not practiced English writing for years. They were demonstrably reluctant to share them publicly until they had become more fluent and felt comfortable with their classmates. Postponing the sharing relieved their anxiety without lessening the impact of the exercise.

Still, in these first two hours of class, the practices introduced began to foster the values and behaviors I hoped to establish. I had managed to keep teacher-talk to a minimum and let student input govern the time. My students' positive responses encouraged me; they had willingly dipped their toes into strange water, so to speak. Warming to that water over the next few months, most would become immersed in the invigorating challenges of constructing knowledge together. Peer reviews, collaborative presentations, panel discussions – these methods would become acceptable to them not through my insistence, but through thoughtful scaffolding and continued negotiation on my part.

Strategic Writing Meets Scored Writing

Answers to my survey informed me that my Chinese students had started learning English as early as first grade, if not earlier. They had much more experience reading and listening in English than in speaking and writing it. That was because they concentrated on those aspects of English that would be tested and scored for advancement. Eighty percent of the English exams they took each year emphasized proficiency in reading and listening with 20% or less devoted to writing proficiency. Also, English writing is introduced at a much later stage than the other skills under a mistaken belief that reading, listening, vocabulary, and

grammar skills will make writing happen automatically. Their writing consisted of short paragraphs on assigned topics, from which many phrases (if not entire texts) were memorized to recall for the test. Richard (his chosen English name) aptly describes the consequences of such practice in his portfolio final:

When the test was over, nothing remained – no useful sentence lasting very long, no powerful skill accumulating in my mind, no real feeling worth cherishing, and worst of all, no meaningful intention to write any more. Honestly, no matter how much score I got in a test, I would not touch the pen of writing again until I had to face the next examination.

Furthermore, many students had not had an English class since high school or early college, often creating a four-to-six year gap in their English language development. Now, their graduate studies mandated a single course in English writing and one in oral communication as refreshers in order to compose and present professional reports at international conferences where English was the universal medium.

Knowledge gained from the survey convinced me to design a writing course that emphasized strategies rather than correctness. Writing or speaking perfect English would be an impossible goal for even the brightest of these students. Getting them more confident with their English, however, seemed possible. Also teaching them strategies that they could apply to multiple writing genres across content disciplines seemed a reasonable approach in the 16 weeks we had together.

In *Strategic Writing*, Dean (2006) argues for teaching students to become consciously aware of the strategies that promote their best writing and to intentionally select those strategies when composing. Such an approach focuses more on writing as choice-making rather

than writing for correctness. It requires thoughtful consideration of the purpose, audience, and context that drives the discourse (Dean, pp. 4-7). Such an approach, however, seemed alien to the way my Chinese students thought about their English writing. When asked what they most wanted to learn in writing, many students answered "to write beautiful sentences" and "to not make any mistakes." Clearly, these students' priorities included errorless papers, a goal which often paralyzed them to take risks in their writing. Again, we faced a needed paradigm shift. Would it be mine or theirs?

An early discussion about what constitutes effective writing proved enlightening; many students thought that good English writing meant long sentences with large vocabulary words. To them, the structure of a sentence was more important than its clarity, appropriate word choice, emphasis, or contribution to the overall text. Their misconceptions about effective English writing stemmed from their past writing exams that rewarded complex sentences and multi-syllabic vocabulary (as do popular computerized scoring programs in America). My student Ben explained, "Many teachers told us that we should use long sentences, because teachers who review our essays would give us higher marks."

Once these misconceptions were uncovered, I introduced the idea of taking a strategic approach to their writing. Choosing this approach would require selecting strategies that were accessible and applicable to multiple rhetorical situations. Focusing on strategies rather than surface errors would generate more and better writing. When properly applied, they would improve students' writing, and that improvement would be visibly apparent.

I chose two key strategies to practice initially: annotation and summarization. Annotating texts together began our observation of the choices writers make and how these choices affect the reader. Annotation also allowed my students to note what English they understood and what English confused them. Individual annotations revealed the idiosyncratic ways we read and introduced them to reader response as a way into textual analysis (Schweibert, 2004).

Summary writing is a strategy these graduates should have been practicing, but more often than not, their summaries tended to be paraphrases taken directly from the texts they were using. In the People's Republic of China, plagiarism is not a concept that fits their culture. Knowledge is considered community-owned, so copyrights to printed material are dismissed or ignored by individuals and society as a whole. Of course, as an American trying to prepare them for international conferences that expected adherence to copyright, I could not accept plagiarized writing. Arming students with a strategy for writing original summaries became paramount to both their English language development and their adoption of international expectations regarding authorship.

Once these two strategies were in place, I added one new strategy per week to their arsenal. Some of the more successful were Noden's (1999) syntactic brushstrokes, which metaphorically compare to the strokes which form a Chinese character. Luminous reflected about these strategies. "Using these brushstrokes to write is much like you had a wonderful pen to paint. You can organize your sentence in a more flexible way. It is magic! The brushstrokes are the colors that make your paint look more colorful and rich."

Personal Connections Meet Public Personae

Chinese students are not used to being asked their opinion by professors. They are taught to honor the expertise of their teachers and the views of their texts. However, when they become graduate students, they are thrust into a climate that demands they contribute original thinking to the academic discourse of their major. They must move beyond the theories and findings of others to discover new propositions, knowledge, and applications. Yet, they have had little practice thinking beyond the obvious, questioning the status quo, or acknowledging the contribution of personal investigation and reflection.

In addition, most PKU doctoral students spend 10-12 hour days in their discipline-specific labs, pouring over research in their fields, worried how they will ever contribute to the body of knowledge already available. It seems a daunting task, particularly difficult for first and second year students. Comfortable with conformity and often feigned aloofness, they tend to assume a public persona in the classroom that shields them from voicing their fears, grappling with ambiguities, or trusting their own intuitions and creativity. The added language barrier that English creates can restrict them even further when they attempt to communicate personally or creatively. Richard, in his portfolio introduction, points out this problem:

In China, most materials for English education, in order to be suitable for examination, are mainly about facts, such as an introduction of a city, a scientific process, a tale of human history. The words and sentences we learned, especially the usage of them, are seldom helpful to us in expressing our feelings, as it is not necessary for testing. As a result, what we learn and what we write always lacks emotion, or worse, is without soul.

Under these circumstances, selecting genres for my writing assignments became a challenge. I could take the practical and expected route by choosing genres typical of academic writing: proposals, abstracts, analytical essays. Or I could expose students to genres that beg writers to express a creative perspective or narrate from personal experience. What if I offered them choice of genre in which to practice the strategies I introduced? Would any of them choose the genres requiring personal connection, introspection, and creative expression?

In way of compromise, for shorter papers of 3-6 paragraphs, I assigned topics that leaned toward experience, observation, or opinion. For lengthier, substantive papers of 600 words or more, I offered a choice between traditional academic genres or creative, artistic ones. I came to this decision after reading the students' first short paper which asked them to write about their name. To expose them to the personal short essay, we annotated an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* about the narrator's name and my own essay about my name. This topic proved to be one that initiated much interchange, inquiry, and awareness of cultural differences. My students were surprised to find that American names are often generational in which children receive a part of their father's or mother's name either as middle names or first names. In my culture, this tradition honors family members. In theirs, however, naming a child after a parent or a relative is considered extremely disrespectful.

The name essay also served a diagnostic purpose. Some students felt comfortable expressing a personal response to their name as modeled in both the Cisneros' essay and mine. Such responses had voice, interest, and energy; but other students struggled for enough to say, were repetitive and void of originality or used borrowed language from historical

sources. Clearly, those willing to risk a personal view or experience were at an advantage in these shorter papers. Offering genres that required an objective, less emotive voice for the longer essays would level the playing field for my close-to-the-vest writers.

Working on description, narration, and point of view throughout the semester helped most students become more comfortable expressing personal voice in their writing. The final essay stretched them even further by asking them to imagine a new concept of time, describe how it would operate in their own lives, and imitate the stylistic features found in Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*. This essay required them to conceptualize time in a different way, building an argument through description, narration, illustration, and summary. Again, I offered a more traditional alternative assignment that required them to read two English essays about an issue of interest and then build their own argument about the issue. Evidence could come from a variety of sources but had to be properly documented and cited. Only 25% of the students selected this option. The rest ventured beyond their comfort zones and were delighted with the results. They eagerly exchanged their essays, intrigued by the time worlds their colleagues had imagined. While admitting that this was their most difficult assignment, many acknowledged it was also their favorite.

Results

With so many variables and no controlled study, it is difficult to prove that the course's effectiveness resulted from a strategy-based, student-centered pedagogy with an emphasis on making personal connections to writing. But if students' final essays analyzing their progress serve as evidence, their noted improvements most often credited specific strategies: peer feedback, options to write with

personal voice, and teacher suggestions for revision. Many students stopped lamenting their mistakes and began valuing additional kinds of feedback besides edited corrections. Richard's conclusion about trial and error showed a definite attitude shift. He wrote,

The first time when I heard Professor Butler encourage us to make mistakes, I was shocked. But when I think twice, I realize it is absolutely right: if I fear making mistakes, I will lose the courage and opportunity to overcome them. Specifically, only after the imperfect sentences are written, can I find out what problems are and how to improve them.

Pleased with the speed he had gained in his English writing, Gene noted that his first essay took a week to complete, approximately two hours per day, while his last essay only took 4 hours in one day and received a better grade. He attributed his increased fluency to the quick-write exercises. Jessica gained an appreciation for the contributions of peers, noting, "Terry, Mary, Young, Arthur, and I changed and modified the essays this semester. From that, I acquired much knowledge from different visual angles."

Being able to recognize improvement gave my students confidence and some impetus to continue to practice their English once the course was over. Jackson noted,

I approach my writing more confidently than I have in the past. Because of my past writing capacity, I was afraid of writing. After the writing study from this course, I grasp some useful writing techniques to improve my capacity. My confidence of writing has grown up with development of my writing skill.

The full effects of this English course on my students' future writing are impossible to ascertain without follow-up. However, since returning to teach at my home

university, I continue to hear from students about their gains in their English acquisition. Several have passed the dreaded TOEFL test with high scores, for example. Recently, Frank sent me his 28-page research paper and asked for help revising it. I noted similar errors I'd seen from past papers, but they were few and easily corrected. The technical clarity and evidence he presented were impressive. His English was fluent and professional; with careful editing, his paper would be published.

Implications for Teacher Education

The international opportunity to teach in a country so foreign to my own forced me to reconsider the practices I use and model in my American English education courses. I had to carefully and thoughtfully examine my pedagogy and select methods based on the experience and responses of my Chinese students. I had to negotiate our different approaches to learning in order to build trust within the classroom and establish a community of writers (Elbow & Belanoff, 1999). I had to help students consider the processes and choices they made both cognitively and affectively that contributed to their understanding and application of strategies. I downplayed the traditional error-finding, correction-fixing role in their writing and adopted a strategy-based, facilitative role that promoted fluency, production, and voice. In turn, students moved toward valuing authentic human response to their work rather than a score that gave little, if any, meaningful feedback.

As teacher educators, we need such opportunities in order to refine and reflect on best practices. We must continue to study the effects of our practices on students whose educational experiences have been radically different from our own and be willing to tailor our methods in response to both formal and informal assessments of students' needs and

expectations. In the maze of technological innovation, digital literacies, and heavy emphasis on pragmatic discourses in which our international conversations now find themselves, I urge teacher educators to preserve the human touch, the personal voice, the imaginative discourse. It was

through these avenues that West (me) met East (my Beijing students) and, in order to learn from each other, used negotiation as the best practice of all.

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