

The Trouble with Cross-Cultural Oversensitivity

With the growing attention to cross-cultural studies aiming to promote cross-cultural awareness among students and ESL/EFL teachers in training, it seems apt to consider a possible problem in the making: the potential for cross-cultural oversensitivity. Recent literature in the pages of this and related journals has taken up problems linked to cross-cultural misunderstanding and solutions to overcome them; indeed, *The CATESOL Journal* recently (Issue 12.1, 2000) devoted its entire theme section to the matter. Certainly, ESL/EFL teachers should receive some training in cross-cultural matters, considering the student populations with whom we work and the values we tend to hold; a focus on these matters also seems well placed in a modern world whose guiding narrative is increasingly one of multiculturalism. However, similar to other trends that have come and gone in TESOL over the past three decades, the case for cross-cultural awareness can be overstated. A potential danger to cross-cultural understanding is that too much of it can come at the expense of a focus on the individual students in our classrooms. We need to consider certain questions: might it be unsafe to have, before a course of study begins, an expectation of students that may or may not be borne out when we actually start teaching? May in fact such expectations provide, in certain situations, for unwanted consequences? The answers to both these questions might be “yes”; yet much of the thrust of the movement toward greater cross-cultural sensitivity leans toward an over-reliance on cultural expectations.

I’d like to stress first what I am *not* saying here. Most in our profession would probably agree that teachers should strive to become aware of their students’ cultural backgrounds—whence they arrived, what language they speak in and outside of their homes, their ESL/EFL backgrounds and the teaching/learning cultures of those backgrounds, or the writing conventions of their native languages. And teachers should also be mindful of these details when engaging with students, whether in the classroom or one-on-one. But mindfulness should not give way to essentialism, vigilant sensitivity to rigid expectations. A central thesis of this Exchange piece is one of *situated relevance*: More important than focusing on the background that got a student into my classroom is an attention to that student as an individual right here, right now, in my presence—until such time, that is, as the student’s cultural, linguistic, and educational background becomes *relevant* to the present, when, unquestionably, such attention might turn up a crucial reason for the student’s current successes/challenges/questions/frustrations. But the

operative word here is “might”: by no means is a student’s cultural background the necessary determinant of his or her current state.

The term *relevance* has become central here, and I should explain it. At the start of a course of study, any aspect of a student’s complex persona and outside biography in some way exists within the framework of that student’s being and could therefore be counted as noteworthy. However, it is a truism to say that we are products of our past—of *course* the things that have happened in our past help shape who we are now. In interaction with another person, however, we can only get to know a limited subset of that person’s past and present experiences. Those we figure to be important to a mutual understanding, we inquire or take note of, while disregarding the rest—at least for the moment—and the person’s other aspects may very well not be relevant right now. For example: I first taught EFL in Taiwan before pursuing a Master’s in TESOL in the U.S. Should I entertain this as a topic in this paper? Having worked with Mandarin speakers, I might have a certain insight about a Taiwanese student’s inter-language patterns. But I have not shown this information to be relevant, since the content of this article has not displayed an orientation toward, say, the challenges facing Taiwanese ESL/EFL students. Thus instead of revealing my entire teaching background in preparation for this paper’s argument, I have chosen a certain priority of relevance that fits the particular orientation toward my topic.

The same is true of what we can and cannot learn about the experience our students bring to our classrooms. Maybe their cultural backgrounds weigh in as an important factor, maybe not. A writing conference with a recent composition student of mine, Keith (a pseudonym), is a pointed example of priorities of relevance. Keith’s portfolio assignment was an essay on Los Angeles; the prompt required him to characterize the city of Los Angeles by means of a nickname and to support his choice with evidence from his own experience as a resident of the city and the readings on Los Angeles we had covered during the term. Keith arrived at conference with a draft whose introduction contained a statement of purpose along the lines of “I am going to summarize the readings we have done about Los Angeles, and afterwards state my opinion on the matter.” The essay’s body proceeded exactly thus: a multiparagraph summary of the readings on Los Angeles that Keith had done, followed by a synthetic thesis that amounted to “Different people have different ideas about Los Angeles. I believe they are all right: L.A. is both a great and a terrible place to live.”

Leaving aside the matter of the somewhat fluffy position-taking in Keith’s essay, his rhetorical style was notable: background and evidence early, a coming-to-the-point at the end. During my conference with Keith, my mind wandered slightly in recollection of articles and books I had seen on contrastive rhetoric. Such a writing style seemed familiar: Connor (1996) in particular had informed me that Chinese and Korean writing traditions prescribe to their high school students a style similar to this. And indeed, my own student Keith is a Korean immigrant, his family having moved here while he was in high school. Thus, when it was time to discuss the essay’s

organization, I succumbed to the same tendency that this Exchange article warns against. I asked Keith, “Did you learn this organizational style in high school in Korea?”

In fact he had not. Keith informed me that an instructor—an American instructor—at a California community college had taught him this style. But more importantly, what became immediately apparent was Keith’s confusion and frustration about having to learn writing styles. He had passed his community college composition class using this rhetorical style, a pass that had contributed to his prized matriculation into UCLA. And now I, the teacher of his new composition class, seemed to be objecting to the way he wrote. “Every teacher wants me to write in a different way,” Keith said in a defeated tone. And *this* issue—not his apparent Korean writing background—is the one that most clearly related to his current state as a developing writer, and the one he was oriented to right now. Had Keith and I continued working with his organizational problems in terms of contrastive rhetoric (a course projected by the question I had asked him), with me explaining to him on “how we do it over here” compared to “how y’all do it over there,” Keith might never have determined a possible direction to take in revising his essay.¹

My experience with Keith was a relatively innocuous encounter, and my prejudgment of his rhetorical style left him with no apparent scars. One could imagine, however, a lapse of more dangerous proportions: urging a “passive” Japanese student, for example, to speak up more often in class, only to find out afterwards that his passivity stemmed from his silently mourning the recent death of a relative. Or strategically pairing up two orthodox Muslim students for a discussion of religious sanctions on dress, in anticipation of an irreconcilable debate with non-Muslims, only to discover that these two were in an argument and refusing to speak with one another. Such lapses in attention to the living individuals in our classrooms, and to their personal sensitivities, are as likely if not more so to engender friction and stress than a failure to implement broad solutions designed to minimize cross-cultural problems, problems that may or may not be caused by the cultural stereotypes teachers-in-training are taught in books and courses on cross-cultural sensitivity.

Such cross-cultural models are indeed being promulgated as a necessary, or at least strongly recommended, component in teacher training. For example, Buckley (2000) adopts a model of ten “cultural variables” taken from research in international business arenas and suggests that ESL teachers should benefit from the insights proposed by the model. The model illustrates the “most significant variations in values that affect international business” (p. 54)—and thus, by inference, ESL teaching. The ten “cultural variables” are Environment, Time, Action, Communication, Space, Power, Individualism, Competitiveness, Structure, and Thinking (p. 55). Each variable is assigned a continuum with extremes on the boundaries—for example, the extremes on the “Power” variable are “Equality” and “Hierarchy”—and illustrated with exemplary references to ESL classrooms and how students

from certain cultures might fall within those continua.

This approach greatly oversimplifies the matter of what makes up individuals. The scenario I imagine is this: I receive my class roster at the beginning of the term, scan the names, and determine that one of the students is an international student from Mexico. I begin building expectations of her. If she is a model Mexican, she will be friendly. She will attempt to be cooperative. She will nurture her relationship with me and her classmates as a first priority, and as a second, work on mastering her English. She will speak up much more often in class than, say, her Japanese cohorts. She will accord with several other of my preset notions (those I have learned from authorities on cross-cultural studies) of the way Mexicans behave.

Will my Mexican student fit this model? Perhaps. But if she does not, I will be confounded. Having built up expectations of the way this student will act and having produced a game plan to deal with her as a “Mexican” member of my class, I will not know what to do if she does not display an orientation toward one or the other side of a given continuum. I will then have to adapt to her existence as an individual in my class rather than primarily as a Mexican. Perhaps there are other background factors at work that render her neither “competitive” nor “cooperative” (the extremes on the “Competition” variable); maybe her display of emotional “restraint” (on the “Communication” variable) in group work is simply a result of her personal trait of shyness, something I said at the outset of class, her own prejudgment toward her group mates, or any number of other circumstances.²

What is my alternative, then? First, it is to determine, initially on a blank slate, the student’s own current situation in the context of the course she has just begun, in recognition of, but not dominated by, factors issuing from her cultural background. I chat with her informally before and after class to see what interests her. I ask during one-on-one meetings (office hours or the like) what she likes about the class, and what she would prefer to see changed. I look at her comments on midterm course evaluations. Perhaps a cultural issue will come up—but *she* should be the one to raise it. In this context, Buckley (2000) qualifies her position by stating that while her model of cross-cultural variables may be used as a resource, variations in individual students should also be accounted for, lest the cultural variables become “stereotyping guidelines” (p. 70), and that the most preferable approach is an “ecological” one that considers a range of outside influences on each student (p. 71). Buckley adds, however, “teaching practices and pedagogical choices need to *begin* with culture” (p. 71, emphasis in original). Why? Why not begin with the student?

Further academic discussions that have promoted, albeit implicitly, a straight-ahead cultural or critically multicultural approach to pedagogy are exemplified by research such as Kubota (1999b) and Kubota (2001), and by the responses and counter-responses to that research (Atkinson, 1999; Kubota, 1999a; Sower, 1999). In these discussions, the debate swings back and forth: What aspects of culture should we present in the classroom? What discursive practices should we introduce to our composition students? To

what extent should we allow students to advance with their own cultural backgrounds, and at what point do we raise the issues of power and domination related to the material we cover in class or the views students bring with them? On a broader level, what can we expect from our students when we consider the cultures they have arrived from?

Certainly any side of the debate has its merits and drawbacks. Kubota (1999b) does right to describe the benefits of a critical multiculturalism—culture is not rigid, but ever-changing, specific individuals may (and Kubota's cited studies show, in fact, that they do) veer from the patterns so often recounted from generation to generation of teachers, and essentialist definitions of the Other are best avoided. Kubota is also wise to point out the alternatives to essentialist philosophies available to students, e.g. taking a middle ground and regarding the individual and the individual's culture simultaneously, and paying close attention to the possibly oppressive discourses we as teachers produce, perhaps unwittingly, while teaching (Kubota, 2001, p. 32). And Sower (1999) may be right when he notes that sincere efforts to educate newly arrived teachers (to Japan, in his case) may include generalizations that stem from a veteran teacher's experience (p. 738)—as long as Sower is very clear that generalizations from experience ("The students in my classrooms have tended to be more reserved than those that you might be accustomed to") are a wholly separate animal from overall generalizations ("Japanese students are all pretty quiet").³

We can, of course, make and learn from some generalizations. K-12 teachers in California's immigrant communities, for example, can safely assume that many of their recognizably Latin American students count Spanish as their first language and therefore have in common the challenges of certain English linguistic features. Also, students may themselves bring up during class discussions or one-on-one conversations the relevance of their cultural backgrounds on their current learning, and it would be wrong to discount such revelations. This is part of the crux of my argument on situated relevance: We deal with the individual student, and in doing so also confront that student's cultural background when it becomes relevant to do so. Of course it is only right to attend to the relevance of their own cultures that students themselves bring to the discourse. The argument in this paper is thus a middle ground. But it is not just as a copout, simply because "some individual attention is necessary, and some cultural"—I also hope to have suggested an interactional mechanism for determining when culture actually becomes relevant. That mechanism is determining from a student's own orientation how s/he stands on his or her own cultural background.

Teachers would do well to approach their students as individuals who are only partially molded by their cultural backgrounds. As my experience with my student Keith showed, any preset notions of a student's culture, whether it be a traditional, knee-jerk reaction I have learned from others, or highly informed, critically evaluated and carefully honed assessments, may be so ill-advised as to throw me off completely, or may cause me to make certain statements that are wrong to the point of offense. Kubota (1999b)

points out that, in fact, elementary school students in modern Japan are being taught more critical thinking. But how much less essentializing and objectifying is it to move from: "I'm going to teach you critical thinking because over in Japan you never had a chance to learn it" to "I've heard they're having you learn more critical thinking over in Japan than they used to."

One of the presumed aims of the above-cited discussions on the culture and identity of students is to help them advance academically, and to help each of them, as individuals, become prepared to succeed intellectually as mature adults. If this is the case, our job as teachers is to help students find their own individual "voices" through the vast fog of past "voices" that has constituted them as human beings. In other words, our job, to paraphrase Bartholomae (1985), is to help them first locate the discourses relevant to their stage of development and from that determine their own personal purposes (p. 139). It is only through attention to individual students that we can achieve this. And it does not matter if we view these outside "voices" as relatively predetermined and fixed (the structuralist paradigm) or fluid, ill defined, or possibly wholly undefinable (the poststructuralist). It is still our charge to coax the individual student to evaluate, build upon, and either emerge from the weight of the past or come to terms with that past in the here-and-now.

Not all ESL/EFL professionals, of course, espouse paying exaggerated attention to cross-cultural matters. Perhaps the most cogent recent case on the need for understanding our students on individual terms is Spack (1997). Spack points out that we need to critically examine what types of characterizations we thrust upon our students, adding, "perhaps we should ask not 'What should we name students?' but 'Should we name students?'" Spack also provides case examples in which cultural overgeneralizations have led to misjudgments in students' rhetorical styles. Zamel (1997) critically appraises much literature that promotes excessive attention to contrastive rhetoric or essentializes a one-sided culture-based assessment of ESL students' needs and potentials. Like Spack, Zamel makes a convincing argument, based on her own experience as a composition instructor and the literature she cites, that students do *not* usually, in fact, fit the convenient molds that we would have them fit, and that attempts to shape them into something they are not is to do them a disservice. (This view concurs with Kubota (1999b), though Zamel goes much further in urging an attention to individual students.)

Zamel and Spack evaluate this issue with regard to composition classes and especially to the "complexity, unpredictability, and multiplicity inherent in our students' attempts to make sense through their languages" (Zamel 1997, p. 349). I would like to add that the issue goes beyond the linguistic and is not limited to the academic success or failure of a student in a developmental composition course. The issue is furthermore a moral one, of how to accord each individual student the respect s/he deserves as a human being, a respect that precludes lumping the student together with like-minded (or "like-cultured") others until such time that that student independently shows

an orientation to that cultural likeness or otherwise indicates that reference to such a likeness is relevant. (Even then, that orientation needs to be examined for the student's stance toward the likeness—certainly one would not want to belabor a student with reminders of a likeness s/he resents.)

Beyond the moral, though, is the practical. It simply is not feasible for us to gauge the whole deterministic history of each one of our students. Why not instead make an early effort to become acquainted with each on a one-on-one basis? Such an alternative is exemplified by another recent piece in *The CATESOL Journal*. Pash & Mullane (2000) present a rubric which refers to the cultural backgrounds of students in the context of the "classroom environment" (p. 181), "the importance of knowing our students" (p. 183), and "understanding differences in students' learning style preferences" (p. 184). Their aim is to achieve an understanding in which the individual students (or the class as a group of individuals) come first. In their description of a semester with a particular group, Pash & Mullane note that they dealt with emergent academic challenges by means of student evaluations and subsequent adjustments to the course, attempted at all times to make their students feel "at home" by incorporating the students' personal information (with their permission) into the course material, and addressed individual learning styles with student surveys that allowed them to provide for those individual styles. While not revolutionary, such an approach is exemplary to a novice teacher in that it places the focus on dealing with students on the students' own terms. With this approach, teachers assess their students' orientations toward the class and its material and work off the concerns thus determined to be relevant.

That seems the most workable, comprehensive, and safest tack. Not only are we thus placing at the forefront of our pedagogical planning the priorities that truly apply to our classrooms, but we are ascertaining those priorities via the particular leanings that those with the most at stake—our students—have shown. Doubtlessly, this philosophy of working off students' realities is one that proponents of cross-cultural communication studies themselves espouse. However, where the thrust toward understanding cross-cultural communication goes potentially wrong is in its essentialist nature—"culture" is a concept people like to discuss as something relatively constant (at a given moment, anyhow) and thus comfortably defining of an individual's makeup. But of course culture is not constant, nor, more importantly, does any one individual necessarily lie on a convenient, easily determined continuum. Once again, this is not to say that we should ignore culture. But as with other two-sided debates within the field of TESOL in the past—focus-on-form vs. fluency, product vs. process approach to writing pedagogy, etc.—perhaps we should halt the pendulum before it swings too far one way or the other.

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Endnotes

¹ One could argue that Keith's writing style was an anomaly, that, yes, there are exceptions, but that *in general* Korean rhetorical styles follow certain patterns. But this does not answer the question, why deal with general rhetorical patterns at all? Why not simply deal with each student on a case-by-case basis?

² In addition, such cultural variables become much more difficult to identify and recognize in a culture such as the U.S. (as well as the U.K., South Africa, Canada, and to a certain extent Australia, just to mention ESL contexts) in which more and more students are growing up in multicultural households, such as the burgeoning Generation 1.5.

³ One hears the extremes of this latter position quite frequently. While teaching part-time in an intensive program a few summers ago, I was observed by a colleague who had worked at the program for several years. During our post-observation meeting, one of his main critiques of my performance (after observing a single 50-minute period of a TOEFL prep course) was, "How are you going to get the Asians to speak up?" He seemed to make no distinction among the actual people sitting in the classroom, who came from a variety of "Asian" (and other) countries and had rather divergent personalities and varying tendencies to speak up in class.

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