

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF WEB CONFERENCING FOR ACADEMIC LITERACY

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Introduction

During the past few years, the international student population in New Zealand universities has grown steadily due to a relaxation of student visa requirements, increased marketing, and the perceived quality of a New Zealand education. The Department of General and Applied Linguistics (DGAL) at the University of Waikato offers the undergraduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme, the Postgraduate Diploma in Second Language Teaching (PGDipSLT), and the Master of Arts (applied) in Applied Linguistics (MA). The general increase of international students in New Zealand has been accompanied by increased enrollments of non-English speaking background (NESB) students in the EAP programme and a continuing presence of NESB students in the two postgraduate programmes. Most of the NESB students in the department's programmes are Chinese from diverse regional and national backgrounds; however, there are also students from South East Asia, the South Pacific, other countries in East Asia, and elsewhere. Some of the NESB students are permanent residents and have lived in New Zealand for several years.

In a review of the literature on the impacts of international students on domestic students, Ward (2001) has reported findings that endorse the use of collaborative methods to foster intercultural understanding and to aid learning. The current study explored the use of a collaborative online learning environment, referred to as a *web conference*, to support the academic literacy of NESB students in an undergraduate EAP course and two postgraduate courses.

While academic writing for NESB students is usually covered in university English as a Second Language courses, literacy and competence in writing are often implicitly assumed in content courses. Several courses in each of DGAL's programmes employ web conferencing to support the academic writing and literacy needs of students who are either NESB or native speakers (NS). A web conference is a form of group discussion in which participants use a web browser to communicate (at different times and from different places) through text messages stored on a central server. Web conferences are similar to electronic mail listservs, with an important difference being that, in web conferences, text messages are posted, read, and replied to in thematically

organised topic areas, or discussions. These online text messages are structured sequentially into discussions, which can be scrolled through and viewed as continuous text. In the present study students posted written work on a preassigned schedule to the web conference and then receive responses from classmates on a similar structured basis. The public conference areas appear the same to all users.

With the use of web conferences, both EAP and content courses can be designed, structured and taught to support the academic literacy needs of all students. In the EAP credit courses, web conferencing provides students with a social context as they develop their writing and academic literacy skills by means of reading and responding to online texts posted by other students. In addition, web conferences are used in similar ways by postgraduate students in the PGDipSLT and the MA. Thus, all NESB students enrolled in these courses receive support through the modelling and scaffolding (Lantolf, 2000) afforded by a web conference.

An undergraduate EAP course and two postgraduate Applied Linguistics courses served as the focus of this study. Evaluative comments collected from NESB students who have used the web conferences are discussed and recommendations for university lecturers are considered.

Cultural learning approaches of East Asian students

Currently, the majority of NESB students in the DGAL programmes are East Asian with most of those students being Chinese from various regional and national backgrounds. East Asian cultures, while having distinct histories and languages, are described by Scollon and Scollon (1994) as 'post-Confucian' to emphasise a shared intellectual tradition that has influenced communication patterns, social organisation, and cultural learning approaches. Most NESB students from East Asian countries have studied English in national education systems that focus on discrete and testable receptive skills such as listening and reading. (See Table 1.) The study habits, preparation tactics, and attitudes toward learning developed by students in the examination-centred system in China have been described by Cortazzi and Jin (1996).

Post Confucian education	Western education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rigorous examinations for limited acceptance into the 'best' universities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • universities are accessible
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching and testing discrete aspects of language, rather than communicative skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dialectical thought and argumentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respect for texts and authors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas can be challenged; ideas are not the person
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writing is a product, not a process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writing is a process, not a product
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language is used to promote social cohesion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language is used to investigate and express meaning and ideas

Table 1: Contrasts between post Confucian and Western education

The post-Confucian learning heritage is reflected in rhetorical paradigms and writing conventions that often diverge from those expected in Western universities (Hinkel, 1999). While such learning prepares students for entrance examinations and writing requirements in their home countries, it does not prepare students for study in Western universities where “language is used as a tool and medium for thinking” (Ballard, 1996, p. 148) and where the emphasis is on academic writing and other literate skills.

Ballard’s and Clanchy’s (as cited in Ballard, 1996) model of cultural approaches to learning consists of a continuum from reproductive (i.e., memorisation) to speculative (i.e., hypothesising). (See Table 2.) This continuum of cultural approaches to learning lies at the heart of the academic difficulties that students face in Western universities. For example, in reproductive approaches to learning, respect for the authority of experts and written texts, coupled with the belief that their own ideas are inconsequential, may lead some NESB students to plagiarise. In contrast to the reproductive approach in some pre-university education, learning approaches given importance in Western universities are more likely to be analytical and speculative (Ballard & Clanchy, as cited in Ballard, 1996) and are believed to encourage students to critique and question. In addition, the emphasis on reproductive approaches to learning is not restricted to the secondary school systems in which NESB students have been educated; NS students are sometimes educated in comparable ways.

Attitudes To Knowledge:		<———— Conserving —————>		<———— Extending —————>	
Learning Approaches:		Reproductive <————>		Analytical <————> Speculative	
Learning Strategies	Type	• memorisation imitation	and • analytical and critical thinking	• speculating, hypothesising	
	Activities	• summarising, describing, identifying, and applying formulae and information	• questioning, judging and recombining ideas and information into an argument	• research design, implementation and reporting • deliberate search for new ideas, data, explanations	
	Characteristic Questions	• what?	• why? how? how valid? how important?	• what if ?	
	Aim	• 'correctness'	• 'simple' originality, reshaping material into a different pattern	• 'creative' originality, totally new approach/ new knowledge	

Table 2: Influence of cultural attitudes to knowledge on learning strategies
Adapted from Ballard & Clanchy (as cited in Ballard, 1996, p. 151)

Awareness of Western academic culture and literacy

Western academic culture varies depending on the country, educational institution, and the discipline or subject, but nonetheless, there are shared and recognisable theories, methodologies, and rhetorical conventions. Students from post-Confucian cultures entering into Western

universities are faced with academic assumptions and expectations that diverge from the familiar. Such differences in cultural learning approaches are fundamental to students' educational difficulties (Brown, 2000). Moreover, the cultural practices that underlie the L1 writing systems of NESB university students are frequently transferred to student L2 writing (Hinkel, 1999). EAP courses that focus on surface features of writing are unlikely to address problems at the level of cultural practices.

The emergence of successful academic literacy strategies is dependent on the development of bicultural awareness in NESB students, leading to the adoption of new learning approaches and writing behaviours (Mangubhai, 1997). However, the awareness and adjustment of NESB students to the academic literacy requirements in a Western university is not solely the responsibility of students; the adjustment can be facilitated by the cultural sensitivity of teachers. Lecturers and programme developers also need to realise that their choices about course design, materials, and methods reflect their own implicit understanding of source and target learning approaches (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Even with such awareness as the basis of design, it cannot be expected that NESB students will acculturate to the expectations of instructors (Lantolf, 1999). Nonetheless, culturally sensitive curriculum designs in literacy such as those introduced by the New London Group (1996) and detailed by Kern (2000) are promising, particularly as they relate to web conferencing. The social learning environment afforded by a web conference allows students in the same course to explore collaboratively their assumptions about literacy. The potential role of web conferencing to support academic literacy is discussed in the following section.

Web conferencing support for academic literacy

Ballard's and Clanchy's (as cited in Ballard, 1996) learning approaches continuum is similar to Scardamalia's and Bereiter's (1996) distinction between knowledge reproduction and knowledge building. Furthermore, Scardamalia and Bereiter (1996) and Murray (2000) have found that designing instruction which makes use of computers for communication, rather than mere content delivery, is more likely to promote an approach to learning that emphasises knowledge building over knowledge reproduction. With the aid of web conferences, frameworks for structured interactions can be designed where students can explore rhetorical style and literacy conventions by posting and then responding systematically to each other's writing. Students' mutual explorations of academic writing engages them in a knowledge building approach to literacy in which they become more self-reflective about writing and literacy (Kern, 2000).

Consistent with Kern's (2000) view that reflection about the design of writing helps students understand and improve their own writing, web conferences have been used in the EAP courses to help students adjust to academic literacy requirements in other university courses. The exchanges possible in the context of a web-supported course differ markedly from those in the students' previous L1 education providing them with, for example, a peer-based model of non-hierarchical and reflective interactions centred on the production of academic text. The purpose of using web conferences is not only to offer L2 learners a model of academic communication; their use is also intended to help student writers maintain an academic community outside of regular class meetings. The goal of integrating international NESB students into mainstream academic life (Ward, 2001) is facilitated by requiring students to publish and respond to assigned course work on web conferences.

The courses are supported by a web-based communication forum called Web Crossing (<http://www.webcrossing.com>) that provides conferencing, or discussion forums, and other services. Any web browser may be used to access Web Crossing, and participants may contribute within thematically organised topic areas, or discussions. A web conference provides a coherent workspace where contributions are published and read. This workspace provides more organisation than electronic mailing lists where messages are received individually.

Web conference related assignments

Web conferencing is used in several courses in the department's programmes, but only three courses were part of this study: an undergraduate academic writing course, a postgraduate diploma computer-assisted language learning (CALL) course, and an MA course in second language acquisition (SLA). Some of the course characteristics are in Table 3. Each course met face-to-face for three or four hours on a weekly basis, and included NESB students.

Using the web conference, students were required to post assignments and comment on each other's work in specific ways described below. In the comments, students are expected to focus on meaning and deeper aspects of style, awareness of audience, topic choice, and organisational structure, rather than surface aspects of writing such as superficial corrections to spelling, grammar, and word choice. Student writing assignments are evaluated by the lecturer on a range of analytic criteria, including grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, but the purpose of the web conference is to help students internalise a sense of audience and become more familiar with the Western academic paradigm. Word- and sentence-level improvements in grammar, spelling, and vocabulary are not

considered sufficient evidence of a deep understanding of the requirements of writing in a Western university.

Level	Content	Students	NESB	Task
2 nd year	academic writing	12	12	journal & comments
PGDipSLT	CALL	14	7	questions & answers (comments)
MA	SLA	12	7	questions & answers (no comments)

Table 3: Courses and web conference task

The courses in the EAP programme are popular, and enrollment has increased from a low of about 25 in 1997 to about 100 in 2000, to over 200 in 2001. In the 2nd year course, students were required to post four journal entries with no word limit on the web conference throughout a 12-week term. Each student wrote a total of four journal entries and four comments on other students' writing during the entire 12-week term. Each of the four journal entries was contributed to a public area labelled with the contributor's name. A different reader was assigned on a rotating basis to write one positive comment and one constructive criticism following each entry. For the positive comment, the reader identifies an aspect of the writing that is interesting or provocative. The constructive criticism is a suggestion for improvement. Students were asked to comment primarily on the meaning of the journal entry, rather than the surface features of the writing, since other aspects of the course provide students with practice in written form. The intention of the peer comments is to give students a direct experience with a knowledge building approach to learning that requires them to reflect on other students' views and develop an awareness of audience.

In the PGDipSLT course, students were asked to read an assigned article while designing their own individual question based on that article; the answer to the question had to be a major theme or synthesis of themes in the article. Once a week, for 10 weeks, each student posted the question he or she had designed with an answer to that question. The following day a different student provided one positive comment and one constructive criticism. As in the EAP course, the schedule of comments excluded the possibility of students repeatedly commenting on the same person's work. Students were asked to comment on the suitability and meaning of the question and answer, rather than grammar, word choice, or spelling. The question and answer is intended also to help students read more deeply in the reflective manner described by Kern (2000).

The MA course provided a contrast to the EAP and PGDipSLT courses. Similar to the PGDipSLT course, students were asked to write and answer a question and post it, but no critical comments on each other's work were required. All of the students in the MA course had been previously enrolled in courses requiring comments.

It is important to note that in each of the three courses the students were the main contributors. Assignments were structured so that students would respond to each other, with the lecturer providing only a private evaluative remark and grade based on each student's weekly contributions. Other than the weekly continuous evaluation, there was no other participation in the conference by the lecturer, and interaction with the students took place through electronic mail, by telephone, during office hours, and in class.

Student views about the web conference

During the eighth week of the course, all students in each of the three classes were asked by the lecturer to write about their views. The students were asked to reflect on the medium of the web conference and the nature of the assignments (i.e., commenting on others' work), but were not expected or asked to reflect specifically on writing. Similar to the manner in which students had commented on each other's work, they were now asked to comment freely and evaluatively on the use of the web conference for the course.

The comments reported here are restricted to those made by NESB students, since the web conference was believed to diverge more from their cultural learning practices than from those of NS students. It is interesting to note that most of the student responses were cast in the form of "positive comment/ constructive criticism," similar to their assignments, even though this response format was not requested in the data collection. Most students in the 2nd year course commented that the ability to post messages any time from home or the university was convenient. On a technical level, no one found the web conference difficult and seemed generally to like it, with one student saying it was fun and several saying they really enjoyed it. However, some students felt ambivalent toward the web stating that while they enjoyed using it, they disliked having other students see their written work. A representative selection of comments follows:

I don't care about other students seeing my work, but I don't like some classmates commenting on me. There are no reason, I just don't like. SA1

I could check whether I am on the right or wrong track...However, I wouldn't like it if I was with people whose first language was English, because I feel more embarrassed....Comments on my work [or commenting on others] was very good, because I can know the different point, which I couldn't find, and it helps me to think more deeply. SA2

It makes me more careful about what I write because I want a good comment. However, I don't like people reading my work. SA3

[I like to] read other people work....but [it makes] me feel embarrassed. I don't like people to read my work. SA4

Reading other people's work is good to learn from each other's mistakes and their point of view helps me to think more deeply....[But] I don't like to give my personal information. I didn't like others to find out my mistakes. I would hesitate. The responsibility of being a mini-teacher made me feel unsure. SA5

[Reading others' work] help me to learn from others...[but] I feel embarrassed from others seeing my mistakes. SA6

The foregoing comments represent the views of those students in the EAP course who recognised a benefit from the public display of their writing, but also felt uncomfortably self-conscious. Yet, as shown by the following comments, other students seemed unconcerned about classmates being able to view their work.

The comments on my writing also helps me to know what other people think about my work. I like it when I give comments on other people's works because this gives me practice on how to analyse others' writings. SA7

You could get ideas about coursework from other people if you don't know how to do your own assignment. SA8

I found it beneficial because I could read other person writing. So, this help me to think my writing critically. Comments help me to improve my English time after time. [The comments] help me to think [of] one subject [from] different angles. SA9

It's good to see each other's work and learn from each other....I find that others can help us to identify our mistake. I don't mind people seeing my work. SA10

It is good for us to know what the other students writing, so we will know different writing style. Sometimes I feel hard to write something. After reading other students' writing, I have some idea how to do my assignment. SA11

In the PGDipSLT course, NESB students did not express a dislike of other students reading their work. Comments from this group indicated a deeper recognition of the potential benefits available through the academic community of the web conference. The following comments were typical.

First of all, the class forum offers a ground for sharing of ideas and the exchange of opinions in which free speech is protected and reserved on academic grounds. It's a great idea to use [the web conference] where the essence of interaction and exchange is enhanced. Once we throw a question outward, there could be someone else who could answer it and is willing to serve and will do us a favour. Second, the service of asynchronous communication [among class members] in some sense offers an indirect way of communication in which conflicts and arguments may be more easily expressed. SB1

I've never participated in a discussion list before. The discussion list is really convenient especially when it comes to handing in assignments. Posting and commenting on each other's assignments has helped me in my writing. I became more critical in terms of what to say or write. SB2

Unlike the previously described EAP or PGDipSLT courses, the students in the MA course were not required to comment on each other's work online, although they had all done so in earlier courses. They discussed and debated course-related ideas openly in class, which was an appropriate substitute for online comments (and one goal of the emphasis on dialectic and reflection). Yet, some students seemed to lament the lack of a written comment requirement in this course.

Last year I considered the comments from the students as NOT the best thing to be done, but this year I missed reading the comments from other students. This year, the discussion list gave me the impression that I am doing my study alone here....Students' comments were like another way of

learning, but this year without comments...I found myself lost to be honest. It was like writing to myself knowing that what I wrote would never be important to be discussed.... SC1

The assertion about being “lost” without peer feedback indicates that it is possible for some students to grow well beyond the fear of peer feedback. Other comments from the MA course substantiate this interpretation.

For me, as a non-native speaker, it is good to see the NS students' work. It does not mean to cheat or to plagiarise their work though. What I like to see from their work is the way they express their ideas in written form, and even their word choices. I consider this to be an essential part of my learning process. SC2

I think the discussion list has provided convenience to many students as well as me. As an [NESB] student I have found the class forum interesting and an excellent opportunity to share with others.... SC3

Questions and answers are helpful for me to understand the articles. However, I still feel embarrassed to post my own questions and answers to the list, because I think my writing is still not good enough. SC4

Contrary to this latter expression of self-doubt, both written assignments and oral presentations by this NESB student were carried out at a high level of performance.

Discussion

University teachers of academic writing classes often comment on the difficulties that they have when trying to encourage NESB students from post-Confucian educational backgrounds to participate and discuss issues in the classroom in front of their peers. Most students will not volunteer an answer and will speak only if they are asked to do so. Further, speaking is likely to be very hesitant and there is a great deal of apparent insecurity. These behaviours are often understood by local and foreign teachers of EFL conversation classes in the source culture, but less so in classes in Western universities where the lecturer may not be familiar with the home countries of NESB students (Ballard, 1996).

From the perspective of NESB students, the worldview held by Western teachers may be unfamiliar and destabilising for them (Scollon & Scollon, 1994). Upon arriving at a Western university, NESB students would benefit from changing their learning approach at a time when they may be feeling intellectually and socially isolated, and just when they are most likely to experience loneliness and culture shock (Brown, 2000; Oxford, 1992).

One concern in this research was that web conferences might create an environment, not unlike the conversation class, but in written form, where students felt vulnerable. However, all students need to be prepared to engage intellectually with content and colleagues. While developing a profound

understanding of the rhetorical paradigms and the academic culture of Western universities is difficult for some NESB students (Brown, 2000), new instructional approaches are emerging that increase exchanges while promoting understanding over differences of opinion (Kern, 2000; New London Group, 1996). Initially, peer exchanges on web conferences may indeed be threatening, yet, if education is to mean more than memorisation, imitation, and knowledge reproduction (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996), students need to learn to have their ideas and writing challenged. A large part of the academic maturation process in Western universities involves learning to reflect on and verify one's own assumptions, to imagine a larger academic audience, and to convey one's findings and thoughts clearly. An NESB student in the 2nd year EAP course expressed this notion well:

[In Hong Kong] the students would not have more choices or freedom of study. They can't study the [courses] which they like or are interested in. They just put all the knowledge which is taught by their teachers in their mind. They do not have enough time to think about it. In Western universities, the students have more choices to exchange their experience. They are taught to think critically, or look at one matter from different angles. They have more presentation or group work in front of the class. They build up their confidence, co-operation skills, and responsibilities from these sorts of presentation. SA9

It is clear that NESB students in the three classes believe the public character of the web conference is beneficial to their thinking and writing, even if it sometimes causes them concern. A few 2nd year EAP students, in the least experienced class of the three in this study, seemed to believe that commenting meant "becoming a mini-teacher" requiring superficial corrections to spelling, grammar, and word choice. Such students tended to make comments on surface aspects of writing at the expense of deeper aspects of style, awareness of audience, topic choice, and organisational structure. However, some comments from other students indicate that students began to understand the value of the web conference – to internalise an awareness of audience and to think more reflectively about writing.

The NESB student comments from the PGDipSLT and MA courses provide some evidence that students can adjust to a Western literacy paradigm in the context of a web conference. However, more research is necessary to understand how web-conferencing can contextualise NESB student writing and help students to internalise a wider audience. Other questions arise. How do NESB students use the other student texts they can view? How do students interpret the comments about their own writing? How can teachers make effective use of web conferences for NESB learners through the design of tasks that promote reflection?

Recommendations

Even though EFL and ESL teachers may have language teaching experience with students from a

range of cultures, it would be unlikely for most other university teachers to have specialised knowledge about the influences of culture on writing. For teachers lacking culture-specific knowledge, web conferences provide a context within which students are supported in their writing. The comments from the NESB students in the three courses indicate that web conferences do provide a useful framework for understanding the learning approaches valued in Western universities. Web conferences can be used to operationalise a clear structure within which students can work. Teachers' expectations regarding student cooperation can be built into both the course design and the required peer interactions.

The implementation of a web conference involves more than just knowledge about the technology. University lecturers considering the use of web conferences and other educational technologies will likely find it important to take into account student and curriculum needs. In view of the fact that students are expected to make a transition to Western academic literacy requirements, specific needs can be matched to characteristics of the web conference that might resolve those problems. For example, discipline-based student groups can be formed within the conference to match the specific genre requirements for writing in the social sciences, management, arts, or sciences. Course design should be continuously refined to meet student needs as these become more clearly identified.

The course outline should detail the specific requirements of the course and clearly articulate the steps students need to take to meet those expectations. The course structure should be planned and designed to include student collaboration and interaction around texts. If students are required to read each other's work and comment, then the exact schedule of comments should be provided. The form, style, and content guidelines of all written assignments should be available for students to reference.

Conclusion

NESB students have chosen to study in a Western university with all the demands to conform to the rhetorical and academic style expected in their major area of study. While some students may question the need for publishing and commenting in the web conference, the experience of collaborative writing and peer evaluation can help students to reflect on their own writing and gain insight into the literacy expectations in their chosen discipline. The current evidence suggests that while student publishing may challenge first language cultural learning approaches, most students are not seriously threatened by web conferences and the public display of their writing. By openly discussing varieties of academic and rhetorical styles, and their underlying assumptions, lecturers

can help students to overcome hesitation about peer collaboration and to develop audience awareness.

Computers are now generally accepted as communications technologies, and applications of educational technology and CALL need to be understood within a socio-cultural context (Chapelle, 2000, p. 218). The use of web conferencing changes the traditional one-to-many classroom communication pattern, familiar to NESB students, to many-to-many in which participation is more interactive. Even more consequential is the fact that web conferences can make student participation and information public, thus providing an audience for writing. Further research is required in order to detect not only the effects on student writing, but also the effects on social interaction and isolation and how this bears on NESB students' membership and participation in a Western academic community.

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