

The conference paper as classroom genre for teaching the postgraduate Chinese learner¹

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Abstract²

The literature on the influence of cultural factors in learning is extensive. In Australian higher education, these days, the social practices among learners from Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) are relevant. This paper reports a study of two Chinese scholars learning academic English at James Cook University. The visiting scholars participated in the group learning practices by collaborating with an international postgraduate group of CHC students who met weekly to improve academic writing and oral communication in Business, Economics, and other disciplines. The scholars also collaborated within the discourse community in the School of Business. The theoretical framework was genre-based teaching together with reciprocal reflection of teaching and learning to complement study of the conference paper genre. Initially, the scholars expected to improve their writing and speaking overnight, but they soon came to understand the developmental nature of learning to write and communicate using academic English. Findings indicate that the scholars improved not only in spoken and written English, but also in language confidence.

Key words: academic English, theoretical framework, genre, conference paper, developmental nature of language learning, language confidence, discourse community

¹ The term, The Chinese learner, is borrowed from the titles of two books edited by Watkins and Biggs (1996; 2001).

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Introduction

Students from Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) have been studied extensively because of their emerging importance in Australian higher education. The research has exposed some of the ethnocentric assumptions about students from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea and Japan, (see Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Writers such as Mak (1990), and Cheung et al. (1992) in Watkins & Biggs (1996), warn against referring to a homogeneous Chinese culture. They remind us that students come from varied social and cultural milieux in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Australasia, North America and UK. Nonetheless, by examining the influences of cultural factors on approaches to learning, for example, collectivism, we may find some useful concepts for teachers of today's ethnic Chinese learners.

Some of the features of the learning practices of CHC students have been outlined by Watkins & Biggs (1996, 2001). These features appear to exert influence on the ways in which these learners take control of their own learning. This leads us to speculate that autonomous learning practices may stem from aspects of the Confucian tradition itself. "Confucianism is a social ethic that provides a this-worldly oriented moral code of conduct whose chief virtues are filial piety and a combination of loyalty and reverence" (Lew 1988, in Ferguson, 2001, p. 17). However, Confucianism is not homogeneous, and national differences have been noted. For example, Confucianism had greater influence in Korea than in China, where the doctrine originated (Hur & Hur, 1988). Korean Confucianism evolved into a strict set of rules for social conduct and encouraged people to sacrifice individualism for the collective good (Ferguson, 2001, p. 17).

The importance of social harmony in relation to the individual in Chinese society has been analysed by several writers. In their review of the learning characteristics of Chinese students, Wilson & Pusey (1996, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996) indicated that collectivism and face consciousness were factors that cause Chinese students to be more achievement-motivated. Ho (1986, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996) observed that when considered globally, the Chinese appear collectivist, compared with the highly individualistic nature of Americans. It has also been said that Chinese collectivism is 'instrumental' in preference

to 'terminal', meaning that the Chinese value what education can achieve for them, and not education for its own sake.

Social harmony and collectivism

According to Ho & Chiu (1994), the concepts of individualism and collectivism are complex, distinct and not at either ends of a single continuum. "... individualism and collectivism are multidimensional constructs; each embodies a constellation of component ideas... There is no necessary contradiction in holding individualist and collectivist views at the same time" (Ho & Chiu, 1994, p. 138). From the scheme, 'Components of Individualism and Collectivism', which was developed for the purpose of classifying over 2,000 popular Chinese sayings, we learn that collectivism and anti-individualism are expressed in only one of the five areas examined: achievement. The other four areas examined in the scheme were values, autonomy/conformity, responsibility and self-reliance/interdependence.

In their social transactions, the Chinese value inter-relatedness and dependence (Tang 1996, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996). This sense of collectivism in Chinese society has been referred to as 'a preference for a tightly-knit social framework in which members can expect others to look after them in return for total loyalty' (Hofstede, 1983, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996, p. 225). The Chinese are believed to value efforts by members of a group achieving collective goals, rather than individual competitiveness, according to Ho (1981, 1986 in Watkins & Biggs, 1996). A study by Bond (1991, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996) revealed that when asked to describe themselves in relation to self and society, Chinese people associate more closely with their 'social self', than their 'ideal self'. They lean more toward group-related concepts, holding group-related traits and roles in high regard.

In fact, the Chinese are prepared to sacrifice personal enjoyment in favour of collective benefit (Yang, 1986, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996). With the influence of modernization, however, the Chinese character is moving away from its collectivist orientation (Yang, 1986 in Kim et al. 1994). Comparing the work habits of Chinese and American students, Wheeler (1986, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996) noted that the type of cooperation and

interaction among Chinese students is task-related, rather than recreational. Furthermore, in their social relationships, Chinese people are more trustful and willing to commit themselves in material resources and information, and at the same time take pride in the success of others (Watkins & Biggs, 1996, p. 183). According to Li, Cheung & Kau (1979, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996), as Chinese children grow older, they show greater willingness to cooperate with peers and, interestingly, this readiness to cooperate survives under competitive conditions: Chinese socialization practices emphasize sharing, cooperation and acceptance of social obligations, and deemphasize competition and aggression' (Ho, 1986 in Watkins & Biggs, 1996, p. 225).

Peer tutoring and learning outcomes

'Friendship first, competition second', is an ancient Chinese proverb which challenges the Western misconception that competition is valued in Chinese society. In a chapter on peer tutoring and learning outcomes, Winter (in Watkins & Biggs, 1996, p. 228) provided five accounts of peer tutoring studies in Hong Kong (Hui, 1985, the North Point study (no date), Ma, 1993, Chan, 1987, and Pang, 1993). The findings of all of these studies suggested that the outcomes for both tutors and students, in achievement terms, are striking. What is worth noting is that these studies were conducted outside of class times. It seems clear that cooperative learning approaches such as peer tutoring have much to offer the Chinese educational context (Watkins & Biggs, 1996). In other words, existing social practices among CHC learners provide an important cue for an educational approach in Australian contexts.

Spontaneous social situations offer students a wealth of opportunities for learning from each other. Boud and colleagues (2001) have described the benefits of informal peer learning which they say takes place in all courses at all levels. Often teachers are not even aware of the fact that students initiate conversations about their learning both inside and outside classrooms. The students gather and share information, review each other's work, consult each other about approaches and work out solutions to assessment tasks. It is worth emphasising that it is not always necessary for academic staff to give feedback:

students can often learn more from formal or informal assessments by their peers (Ramsden, 2003, p. 189).

Chinese students, perhaps more than other students, have a real need to work together. Even when rewards or grades are awarded individually, Chinese students are ready to cooperate with each other on an informal and spontaneous basis. Researchers in Hong Kong observed cooperative learning activities being organised by the students themselves. Instead of teachers coordinating learning groups formally, the initiative to gather in small groups and cooperate in preparation for assessment tasks was undertaken by the students themselves (Tang, 1996, in Watkins & Biggs, 1996). These learning practices devised by students have an important educational effect. Compared with other styles in competitive and individualistic situations, studies reveal that cooperative learning is superior in enhancing student achievement (Humphreys, Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Nichols & Miller, 1994; Slavin, 1983a, 1987; Topping, 1992; Web, 1985 in Watkins & Biggs, 1996).

Preference for group learning

Following Watkins and Biggs (1996, 2001), it can be argued that these CHC learning practices appear consistent with the use of teaching approaches such as peer tutoring. Peer tutoring is guided by a cooperative value that the success of others is as important as one's own success; it involves students actively working together to achieve a shared learning goal; and it requires the teacher to become a manager of learning rather than a provider of instruction (Watkins & Biggs, 1996, p. 221).

Ramsden (1992) has drawn attention to the commitment for higher education to promote student independence through active and responsible cooperative learning practices. Clearly, there are many advantages for the self-directed learner when working with peers. The affective, attitudinal and behavioural gains for both the students and the tutors involved in peer learning are well known. We are interested, however, in the process involved when spontaneous learning practices result in adaptive and productive pedagogical strategies.

It is interesting to note that the preference for group learning may explain one of the curious contradictions about CHC learners. In Western countries, educationalists often assume that memorization equals mechanical rote learning (learning without understanding), even when analysing Asian approaches to learning. Consequently, Western teachers often perceive Chinese students as passive rote learners. In their work on the psychological and pedagogical perspectives in teaching Chinese students, Watkins & Biggs (2001) referred to the paradox of the Chinese learner: how is it possible that Chinese students who rely so much on memorization as a learning strategy outperform their Western counterparts and have deeper, meaning-oriented approaches to learning?

Social and communicative nature of CHC learners

We suggest that it is the social and communicative nature of CHC learning approaches that actually leads to generating deep learning. The meaning or message underlying the learning material is critical in deep learning, unlike surface learning, where the learning material itself is the focus. Tang (1990, in Ramsden 2003) pointed out the positive effects on achievement for students involved in cooperative group discussions about assignments. “They perceived their activity to be useful for understanding the content to be learned and used deep approaches to learning it. These were in turn related to higher-quality learning outcomes” (Ramsden, 2003, p. 98).

We have noted here the extent and nature of the spontaneous group learning practices of CHC learners. It could be argued that more dialogue among teachers and learners as a group, increases the responsiveness of the curriculum to student needs and learning preferences. We wanted to find out how university teachers can improve teaching and curriculum in communities of learning practice. In other words, how can we construct more informed pedagogical relationships on Australian campuses, between teachers and learners, and among learners themselves? With this purpose in mind the present authors decided to monitor the progress of two visiting Chinese scholars participating in group learning practices at James Cook University. They joined an international postgraduate group of CHC learners who met weekly to improve academic writing and oral communication in Business, Economics, and other disciplines.

Group learning practices at JCU

The learners in our study audited classes in Marketing, Tourism and Information Technology at James Cook University from September 2003 to September 2004. The authors of the present study were team teachers collaborating in the academic language program. Both authors, the first, a learning adviser (native speaker of English), and the second, a bilingual (English and Chinese) educational development adviser, had experience in teaching academic writing to international postgraduate students. The Chinese learners, Meini and Shuwen (not their real names), were senior visiting scholars in the School of Business from a university in China where English is used in teaching Business courses. The scholars had initiated collaborative activities with academic staff from the School of Business at JCU, to write papers and also to present these at the 16th Annual Conference of the Association for Chinese Economic Studies (Australia) - University of Queensland, Brisbane, 19-20 July, 2004. They joined the group of postgraduate international students and other visiting scholars who met weekly to communicate, edit and revise their work-in-progress.

The theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in the language learning program was genre-based teaching or a “means of studying spoken and written discourse for applied ends” (Swales, 1990, p.1). “Learning the genres of one’s culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it” (Christie, 1987, p. 30). The visiting scholars wanted to write a research paper and prepare an oral presentation. In this case the goal for the scholars was to enter into the genre of a foreign culture, the academic English conference paper. We followed the ‘action teaching’ model of curriculum design in which students learn how to manage their own learning in an academic conference course (Cadman and Grey, 2000). The aim of our research project was to improve our practice and understanding of how the Chinese learner learns to write and communicate using the genre of the academic conference.

The importance of genre approaches to teaching second language writing has been outlined by Swales (1990) and Hyland (2003). “A genre comprises a class of

communicative events, ... share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style” (Swales, 1990, p. 58). This view is supported by Hyland (2003): “Genre-based pedagogies offer students explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts. As such they represent the most theoretically developed and fruitful response to process orthodoxies” (Hyland 2003, p. 18). Apart from genre, the terms, discourse community and language-learning task are fundamental to the genre framework.

The discourse community

The term, “discourse community” (Swales, 1990, 1998; Porter, 1992) is fundamental to the genre approach to writing. Discourse community been described as “a powerful metaphor joining writers, texts and readers in a particular discursive space” (Hyland, 2003, p. 23). Academics and other students in the School of Business together with the peer group who regularly attended the language workshops each week made up the discourse community. In addition, there were other visiting scholars and postgraduate students from disciplines such as Economics, Information Technology and Tourism in this group. In these peer learning sessions the participants gave and received feedback on their writing and oral presentations. To ensure that the focus was on the participants and that their voice was dominant, each week we negotiated with them to take turns to chair the sessions. A time-keeper monitored the oral presentations and kept them to a limit of five or six minutes.

The language learning task

The language learning task in a genre-centred approach “... is likely to focus student attention on rhetorical action and on the organizational and linguistic means of its accomplishment” (Swales, 1990, p. 82). As mentioned above, the goal of the scholars was to write a conference paper and present it to an audience in English. According to Cadman (1997) language learning tasks that are “sufficiently relevant, rigorous, authentic

and public” promote student “ownership of their own language and learning” (p. 47). Indeed one can hardly conceive of a more threatening example of pressure than presenting a paper in a foreign language at a public forum such as the professional conference. When challenged by writing and presenting a conference paper, “there is an unmistakable, almost unstoppable, movement towards learner autonomy for almost all students” (Cadman, 2000, p. 35). Through negotiating with the scholars the following tasks were incorporated into the language learning curriculum: presenting, editing, reviewing, giving and getting corrective feedback in relation to their work-in-progress.

In the excerpt which follows Meini describes the weekly classes for presenting the various sections of her work-in-progress, the conference paper. She refers to the Abstract, Introduction, and other sections of her paper: Overview of the Real Estate Development in China, The Problematic Nature of Real Estate Development in China, Some Basic Principles for Sustainable Real Estate Development, Generic Measures for Sustainable Real Estate Development and Conclusion.

Excerpt 7 – September Interview

Meini: Every Wednesday ... **I was looking forward - I can take part in the course;** I can meet the other classmates. It’s a **happy feeling** and then I prepare something and give a presentation. You know I give a serious presentation about the conference paper. That’s very helpful. That helps me to finish my paper, you know every Wednesday... **I still remember the first Wednesday I wrote the abstract,** and the second **I wrote the first part** and the third **I write the second part** and finally, **the last one. The last seminar I give the conclusion and so I just connect them together.**

Reflecting and evaluating learning processes, speaking and writing logically, critical thinking, effective communication, collaborative and peer learning, and adapting to a linguistically, culturally and socially different environment, all constitute learning outcomes for students at JCU. Moreover, student-centred learning forms one of the University’s guiding principles: “We will constantly seek to improve the service we provide for our students, so that they may reach their full potential in a supportive and student-centred learning environment “ (James Cook University, 2004, p. 11). We accepted the commitment to be accountable for the learning outcomes of our students.

Student-centred learning environment

Therefore, student- or learner-centredness, which has at its heart, the development of language skills and learner autonomy became an important aspect of the program. This is in contrast to the stronger emphasis on teacher-control and the coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching (Cannon & Newble, 2000). In a student-centred model of learning, students take an active role in planning their learning, interacting with teachers and other students, researching and assessing:

- they make choices about what and how to learn; ...
- the teacher guides, he/she is a mentor and facilitator of learning;
- intrinsic motivation develops (interest, curiosity, responsibility);
- the focus can occur anywhere; there is greater flexibility in learning and teaching, and also in assessment, with self and peer assessment becoming more common;
- the long-term perspective is an emphasis on lifelong learning.

(Cannon & Newble, 2000, p. 17)

Biggs (2003) believes that “(l)earning is constructed as a result of the learner’s activities. Activities that are appropriate to achieving the curriculum objectives result in a deeper learning approach to learning. Good teaching supports those appropriate activities, thereby encouraging students to adopt a deep approach” (p. 11). Approaches in second language learning are influenced by attitudes, motivation and language anxiety (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). They refer to two categories of “affective individual difference variables”: Language attitudes and motivation, and language anxiety and self-confidence (p. 9).

Conclusion

Comparing their experiences learning English in Australia, to those in China the scholars allude to non-linguistic outcomes, such as changes in attitudes and understanding, which they have become aware of after living in Australia for one year. Meini regards the year as a very important time in her life for learning more than the English language. She values the attitudinal changes that have taken place: “opened my

view/mind to know different feeling, thinking and lifestyle”. She believes that her English has improved, but not in the way she had expected it would. Shuwen reports greater confidence with respect to speaking, and hopes for future collaboration with professors in her field.

Excerpt 10 – September Interview

Meini: To learn English very well or speak it very perfectly the language but I think this one year in Australia is a very very important time for me in my life not only in studying English but **it’s opened my view and opened my mind and I can know different feeling, different thinking, different lifestyle**, but not really which one is right, which one is wrong just we can **understand each other**, that’s very important. I can tell that **my English has improved but not too much as my imagine my expect**, but also ok I think.

Shuwen: For talking, speaking I can tell it’s more easy than before and **very important is I confident to speak. I don’t scared if it’s right or not. Before I always thinking for long time to make up all the words in the sentence.** In these two conferences I met some professors in other universities and they said they hoped to **cooperate with me in the future so I think there’s some very very good chances for me to do that (write).**

It is clear that both scholars are keen to work in a team and want to write more research papers in English. Participating in international conferences and meeting new academics in their fields has inspired them and they describe the experience in terms of a “good chance” or opportunity. It could be concluded that due to the successful outcome collaborating with the Australian professor on the conference papers, the visiting scholars are highly motivated to repeat this experience in the near future.

In the present study the voice of the scholars has been used to demonstrate their difficulty when learning academic English, “... a complex and unstable target” (Swales and Feak, 1994, p. 2). As previously mentioned our aims were to encourage these adult learners to represent their own voice in the design of the curriculum, and develop a sense of author responsibility. “In giving learners control over the initiation of feedback, student self-monitoring is a valuable way of increasing the element of autonomy in the learning of writing “ (Creswell, 200, p. 235). Also, from the work of Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) we now understand that language learning is influenced by affective variables such as attitudes, motivation and language anxiety.

According to the visiting scholars, the effective learning outcomes such as motivation, interest, independence and confidence play a very important role in learning to write and communicate using academic English. The scholars identified the collaborative efforts to write and deliver a conference paper with a staff member in the School of Business as highly beneficial. In addition, these adult learners were able to integrate and collaborate with other graduate students smoothly and effortlessly. It is argued that this is because of three important features of the program: it was student-centred, the scholars were working on a project of their own choice, and finally, the theoretically justified language approach was compatible with their learning styles and preferences.

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