

## Addressing Cultural Differences

Because language and culture are so intimately connected, it is not surprising that the issue of cultural difference plays a role in how students write in a second language. For some students, learning to write in English involves a process of cultural and identity change. They may need to change or acquire a second writing culture and manage possible conflicts between their cultural identity and standard academic English.

By examining the cultural and dialectical differences that students bring to the classroom, teachers can become better readers of students' writing, and students can make more informed writing choices. In this chapter, we examine differences in writing culture and dialect, and we provide suggestions for developing assignments that allow students and teachers to reach a deeper understanding of these differences.

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- Do you think that the qualities of good writing are culture specific or universal?
- What makes you think so?

### Writing Cultures

First, let us consider what is meant by *writing culture*. Writing teachers often assign different tasks for different purposes. For instance, some teachers use writing to evaluate students' knowledge of the material.

However, in a classroom in which writing is seen as a process of making one's own meaning, a student who writes to display knowledge may be seen as not doing enough analysis. To give another example, in many countries it is considered inappropriate or even risky to critique the government. When a student from such a country is asked to engage in critique, he or she may find it hard to do so. Because of these differences, it is important for teachers to consider students' writing backgrounds. For an excellent study contrasting what Chinese and U.S. teachers considered to be good writing, see Li (1996).

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- How would you assess students' prior writing experiences?
- What questions would you ask?

Differences in writing culture have been studied most extensively by focusing on differences in texts. In the 1960s, an applied linguist named Robert Kaplan tried to account for differences in the texts of L2 writers in the United States by examining paragraph structure. His work established the field of *contrastive rhetoric*. Over the past four decades, contrastive rhetoric has grown to examine texts written by L1 and L2 writers. Scholars have asserted that there are cultural differences in such aspects as directness, organization, and “moves” made to fulfill certain writing purposes.

Knowledge of these textual differences can be very helpful to teachers reading student texts. For example, many U.S. teachers are used to finding the main point in a thesis statement in the first paragraph. When they do not see it there, they may have difficulty following the thread of the essay, feel lost, and conclude that the essay is not well structured. However, if a teacher knows that in some writing cultures the main point comes at the end, he or she can learn to look for it there. After locating it, the teacher may find that the organizing structure is clear. As this example illustrates, learning about differences in writing cultures may help teachers become better readers of student writing; it also helps them give more sensitive and effective feedback.

Below is an email written by a female student from Saudi Arabia who wanted to obtain permission to enroll in a university course in the United States. Does this writing feel culturally familiar or foreign to you? What makes it so?

*Dear Respected Professor Moth-Smith:*

*I would like to tell you that, good chance comes only once in the life. I am a forgen student come from oversee to educate myself and chalange myself. I came here with all hope and eccatment to study. I am a mother and I am working. My position will be hold for me for 2 years and if there is any delay with my studing I will not be able to have my job agine. Women in my country don't have chance to be creative she has to fight and not give up. I know studing overseas is not an easy thing to do but I prefer to have any new experience and not blaming my self for the rest of my life.*

*These day your education is your support and without that I will be weak. I am nothing even if I have a lot of money my brain will be empty. Thank you for reading my letter and your understanding and I hope I will be allowed into this course.*

*Regards.*

It is important to note that the field of contrastive rhetoric has been seriously critiqued (see Casanave, 2003, for a discussion of the controversy). One concern is that writers from certain language backgrounds may become stereotyped. To illustrate using the previous email example, a writing teacher might expect all Arabic writers to make the main point at the end of their writing, provide extensive background, demonstrate reverence for education, and show respect for the audience. An argument that counters this assumption is that differences in text type are more important than cultural differences. In other words, this student wrote this way not because she was Saudi, but because she felt that these moves were appropriate for an email asking for special consideration from a superior. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that having a certain home language does not automatically lead to a certain type of writing and that we are all capable of producing different types of writing.

To help students understand the influence of culture on writing, teachers can ask them to identify culture-specific features in

texts written by writers from different cultures. To personalize this activity, teachers can also design assignments that allow students to explore their own schooling backgrounds and analyze their own written texts. For example, students can analyze one of their own previous pieces of writing for its cultural influence. First, they can look at the assignment itself: What class did they write this for? What was the purpose of the writing? What was the teacher looking for? In a class discussion of these assignments, the teacher can learn important background information, perhaps that some students may not have written extended prose before, some may only have written for knowledge display, and some may have had teachers who accepted cut-and-pasted research papers.

Intermediate- or advanced-level students can also analyze their writing for its style, considering whether they believe it to be culturally influenced. To scaffold this assignment, the class should examine various aspects of English style that are being taught, such as having only one main point and putting it at the beginning; using data, quotes, and citations for support; and having a three-part structure (introduction, body, conclusion). In focusing on these aspects of writing, a number of interesting differences may emerge. Students may find that they put the main point at the end or that they use repetition or metaphor for support. Additionally, they may realize that they tend to give more background information or use longer sentences than their teachers expect, or have the expectation that their readers should do more work to understand them. Once such differences are clarified, students can make informed choices about their writing style.

## Dialectical Differences

The second aspect of cultural difference that we would like to address is language variation. In some ESL contexts, teachers may encounter students who identify with English forms that differ from the variation of English being taught. For example, an African student who has migrated to Canada may find that he not only acquires English from rap music but also identifies with the Black subculture (Ibrahim, 1999). In such cases, teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that a correction in language can be read as a challenge to the student's identity. Students may resist such identity challenges, and this resistance needs

to be addressed in order for them to become successful English writers. One way to do this is to discuss the topic of language variation, power, and identity in the classroom. (For more on issues of identity, see Canagarajah, 2002, pp. 105–118.)

### REFLECTIVE BREAK

- What forms of English are students in your classes exposed to, and in what contexts are they used?
- What form(s) are you expected to teach?

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed the importance of addressing differences in writing culture and dialect in the writing classroom. We would like to emphasize the importance of approaching these cultural differences openly and without value judgments. In Chapter 3, we examine planning for writing instruction.