



PII: S0889-4906(96)00029-4

## **Thesis Writing for International Students: A Question of Identity?**

**Kate Cadman**

*Abstract*—International postgraduates in the humanities and social sciences face particular challenges in writing English language theses, and in my experience often express these challenges negatively despite all the helpful explanations which they receive about our practices and conventions. A significant cause of difficulty may lie in the different epistemologies in which these students have been trained and in which their identities as learners are rooted. In this paper I explore this issue of identity in relation to postgraduate argument texts and examine research students' own perceptions about their writing experience. The clear associations which these students make between their self-concepts as learners and their English language texts have, I suggest, significant implications for pedagogic practice. © 1997 The American University

### **Introduction**

Looking back, I realize that the process of learning to write in English is, in fact, a process of creating and defining a new identity, and balancing it with the old identity. The process of learning English composition would have been easier if I had realized this earlier and consciously sought to compare the two different identities required by the two writing systems from two different cultures (Fan Shen (1989: 466) [Chinese ex-graduate student, Marquette University]).

When I met these words and the beautifully articulated experiences of Fan Shen, I felt I was looking through the back of the looking glass, seeing a reality of which my own thoughts were the pale reflection. I am a long-serving, tertiary teacher of my own language, and in recent years I have come to focus my thinking on the relationship between an international postgraduate's sense of his or her own identity, of themselves as a whole

person—thinking, feeling and studying—and the English language thesis drafts which they produce.

My aim in this paper is to share some of this thinking and to identify the experiences which have led me to change the focus of my pedagogical practice, in the spirit of Van Manen's (1990: 77–109) "hermeneutic phenomenological reflection". Van Manen (pp. 12–13) points out that such reflection is best expressed as a personal and "primal" telling, characterized by "thoughtfulness". By doing this I am seeking here to "grasp and formulate a thematic understanding" of certain living situations, as suggested by Van Manen (p. 79), and to construct a possible reading of events and texts following the specific criteria for constructivist inquiry established by Guba and Lincoln (1989: 174–176).<sup>1</sup>

I will begin by outlining the contexts of my teaching and clarifying the conventional epistemological approaches which are established in these contexts. In the light of the conventions which have been established in these areas, it becomes important to examine international research students' texts carefully in order to identify some of the epistemological as well as textual challenges they face in writing these genres. I shall also explore some of the ways in which my students have expressed their own experiences of learning their appropriate text practices.<sup>2</sup> For me, these personal interpretations are striking and have significant implications for postgraduate pedagogy.

### **The Context of Argument: "Critical" Approaches and the Writer's Voice**

The context of my teaching is a discipline-specific Integrated Bridging Program for international postgraduate research students in the humanities and social sciences at an Australian University. The curriculum is based on the adjunct model as outlined by Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989).

As I begin to integrate the teaching of writing into the students' research programs, I meet the central issue to be addressed in their writing performance; the construction of an academic argument based on research data. I have introduced students from many cultures to Masden's (1983: 177) criteria for thesis assessment which are still widely recognised in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Guba and Lincoln (1989: 174–177) specify a set of conditions for constructivist inquiry which "must be adhered to closely" if the inquiry is to be meaningful. In summary they are the following:

- a natural setting ... in the same time/context frame that the inquirer seeks to understand
- enquirers who enter the frame as learners, not claiming to know preordinately what is salient ... not knowing what it is they don't know
- employing qualitative methods, ... talking to people, observing their activities, reading their documents, responding to their non-verbal cues and the like
- drawing on *tacit knowledge*, that is, all that we know minus all that we can say, judgement developed out of experience.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations are taken from my students' unpublished writings with their permission.

English language humanities and social sciences. According to Masden, writing in these disciplines should comprise:

- a *convincing* account
- an ordered, *critical and reasoned* exposition
- the *testing* of ideas
- competence in *independent . . . experimentation*
- ability to make *critical* use of published work and source materials
- originality*

At face value, these are useful signposts to good practice and this terminology is very often employed by departmental supervisors. However, I have found that international students, whether or not they are confident of their grammar and study skills, often find such criteria difficult to interpret, and even more difficult to apply to their own composition. In fact, my students have raised many questions which have allowed me to glimpse how mystifying they may find these concepts:

- How do you make an account *convincing*?
- What is the difference between a *critical* exposition and an exposition?
- How do you *test* ideas?
- How *can* my experimentation be *independent*?
- You mean I am to *criticize* published work!
- How do I *dare* to be *original*!

*How* becomes a key question.

A significant issue here is the difference between the learning styles and attitudes to the demonstration of knowledge which many international students have inherited and those which they meet in English language contexts. Ballard and Clanchy (1991: 13) have charted the English language academy's respect for "analysis" and "interpretation" as distinct from "reproduction" in the construction of an argument informed by knowledge. The way in which this distinction is represented textually becomes a key to what supervisors often call *intelligence* of the writing. In language, such intelligence is given form in markers to the *interpersonal* (or interactive) level of the text as distinct from markers to its *experiential* (or real world) level (Halliday & Hasan 1975: 16–23).

In discussion with students, I use the term *voice* to label for them the argument and the purpose of the writer in order to help them to pay attention to the language structures in which this purpose is expressed. The term then becomes a reference for what Swales and Feake (1994: 77) have called *positioning yourself* or the writer's *claim*. My use of the term does not reflect the width and complexity of recent debates about voice (see Yancey 1994), but is a simple way of referencing the language of the academic writer's position or contentions, integrated into the text with information from external sources. Where this language is not controlled in academic argument, there is a noticeable void for readers in the Western academy, and significant loss of value. In practice, it seems to me that weaknesses of grammar,

reproductive description and so-called plagiarism in international students' writing are the effects of this problem, not its causes.

It is perhaps a useful step for us as writing teachers to begin by exploring the students' own texts with them, with the aim of grasping, without judgement, each students' written voice in the manner of a critical reader in their discipline. Examples of such exploration which have furthered my own learning process may throw some light on the complexity of this process.

### Exploring International Postgraduate Texts

A scholarly young woman writing an M.A. thesis exploring to what extent Plato, John Stuart Mill and Aristotle can be called feminists, consulted me with a text which included the delightful sentence that in the *Republic* "a basic distinction between the sexes is that men beget and women have bears". We laughed together as I was able to reformulate this point for her in the simplest way, by supplying the idiom, a language entity, which she was missing: "a basic distinction between the sexes is that men beget and women bear children". However, this version failed to capture for me the force of the point being made, so I asked her if she would prefer "a basic distinction between the sexes is that men beget *but* women bear children". I also pointed out that it was possible to be even more forceful if she wished with "a basic distinction between the sexes is that men *beget children but women bear them*".

At this point, however, she was not able to clarify the emphasis she needed nor to make a choice from amongst these options. As we talked it became clear to me that what was not accessible to this student was how this distinction was represented in the language. I believe that she understood the distinction itself clearly enough when it was pointed out to her, but I do not think that she heard it in the text; her own writer's voice did not require it.

Because of this thought process, and also spurred perhaps by her use of the archaic word "beget", I unconsciously prompted the following dialogue:

- Me: Ah, so this is your point, about the *Republic*?
- S: Yes.
- Me: So Plato himself does not use these words in the *Republic*.
- S: Oh yes, Plato uses these words.
- Me: What is Plato's purpose in using these words? What point is he making?
- S: ? (Puzzlement)
- Me: What point are *you* going to make?
- S: But it is true.

When I suggested we find the extract in the *Republic*, the student pointed out that in fact it came from a feminist critique of Plato, unreferenced in her chapter. The possible "plagiarism" here resulted from the fact that in her whole approach to the task, as in her text, this student/writer had sought

for a series of points and perspectives in which there was no place at all for her own thesis; she was not working with the concept of such a thing, so her language choices did not reflect one.

In a more specific example, a competent Indonesian professional in Population Studies, who understood theoretically the role of the research reviewer, wrote the following:

Hope (1994) suggests that by raising economic growth and giving price supports to agricultural products, as well as keeping urban wages from rising, rapid urbanization can be diminished. Unless such concrete efforts are made to moderate the rural-urban wage differential, migration of rural people to urban areas will continue due to the gaining of economic improvement.

There seems to be only a slight dislocation of orientation here in the second sentence, i.e. who is actually saying “Unless such concrete efforts are made . . . , migration to urban areas will continue . . .”? Hope, the author, or the student/writer? This small question again revealed in discussion the tip of an iceberg. In answering my questions about whose *viewpoint* is expressed by the word “unless”, the student continued to reply in terms of *content meaning* even though she did have a discrete evaluation of Hope’s article at the end of the section. She clearly understood the principles and the text practices of reviewing, but she found it quite impossible to revise her own writing in the light of this knowledge. Literally, she was not reviewing Hope’s argument in the process of developing one of her own; she could easily speak for Hope in her writing, but she did not select language which simultaneously created a voice of her own in the text in response to his.

Another short example strengthens the point. An informed Indonesian sociologist wrote in his review of the literature in his field, “It has been perceived by these theorists that health status and quality of life are structural factors. Therefore, such programmes of health promotion and prevention are on the right track”.

In querying the possible non-sequitur, caused as these often are by verbs of inquiry and examinations, I discovered that a central focus of his understanding as a developing writer, and of mine as his reader, lay in the question: *Who is saying “Therefore”?* If it is the theorists under review, then the problem is easily rectified: “It has been perceived by these theorists that health care and quality of life are structural factors *and that therefore* such programs of health promotion and prevention are on the right track”.

If, however, this *therefore* is in the voice of the student/writer, we must first be satisfied that it is because of the *perception* that the programs are judged to be on the right track, and then that this point is linked, in the student’s mind as well as in the text, to a coherent chain of points which support a unifying contention.

It seems to me that this issue is a central one for international post-graduates. In our academic speak, the meaning we attach to the word “thesis” fluctuates tantalizingly between the bound volume and the argument

that informs it. And, as Anderson and Poole (1994: 22) explain in their handbook, its significance extends even further than that: A statement of one's thesis dictates the choices being made at all levels of work, in the research design, in the collection of data and the analysis of it, in the literature review, and in the writer's analysis and conclusions. Where such a thesis is not apparent or is inconsistent, the student's work is likely to be undervalued.

### **Students' Self-Perceptions in Relation to Analytical Writing**

The need to set up one's own position in the written text reflects then, the whole epistemological orientation of our culture and it is one which, as recent studies show (Fox 1994; Connor 1996), international students are unlikely to share. The struggle to represent oneself in this specific way in writing extends far more deeply than the construction of a textual product. To my view, the challenges may be seen to lie in at least two other interdependent dimensions: the ways in which the students as researchers approach their projects, and the sense of identity which informs their approach. Fan Shen (1989: 463–465) points out that, despite her "language" learning, "In several of my early papers I found that the Chinese approach . . . persisted, and I had considerable difficulty writing". Later, when she was able to employ what she calls "all the general rules of English composition", this was because, "I feel that I am writing through, with and because of a new identity".

This confusion about the self at the heart of the process seems to be the cause of some of the problems. Students who are unclear about who they are expected to be, and how they are expected to participate in their own learning, often experience their learning, and express it, negatively (Lu 1982). In talking about her own academic progress, Fan Shen (1989: 460) consistently uses metaphors of fighting and suffering as she relates the composing process directly to her own self-concept. She speaks of "clashes" between backgrounds, a "mental struggle which has lasted several years", a "prolonged, uphill battle to recapture myself", writing which is "rather painful to hand in", and the need to "wrestle with . . . the whole system of ideology which previously defined me in myself".

My own students have more often used the vocabulary of "loss" and "being lost", commenting not only in the people and cultures they have lost in leaving their countries behind, but also the skills and competencies they feel they have lost in our environment. They even express the perception that they themselves *are* lost, feeling directionless in approaching their writing tasks<sup>3</sup>, thus unconsciously highlighting that for them there is a direct

---

<sup>3</sup> One group of 12 Indonesian postgraduates in Geography commenced a class by asking that we change our lesson plan completely because they felt they had "completely lost their way" in writing the departmental literature review which we had previously prepared for and practised. They said that in their private discussions they had "lost" the purpose of the review and so were finding it hard to begin. I was only too happy that they had "found" such vital questions, and thus saw my role as leading them to return to the interpersonal language of the review, helping them to discover where they were.

relationship between identity and language performance (see Brown 1994: 99–120).

One of my Chinese students has been able to comment very perceptively about her own experiences of panic and disorientation when she first began to realize that such issues as textual positioning even existed, long before she felt the implications of dealing with them. Smattering her conversation with expressions like “awfully confused”, “very frightened”, “you cannot imagine how worried”, she explained that in her Bridging Program not only did she become aware that she was lacking some essential skills which she had never before dreamed existed, but she had also lost abilities which she had prided herself on in China, in particular her perceptive reading and her skilful memory. After participating in a class on the Harvard referencing system and conventions of in-text citation, she was horrified to discover that she could not remember the details. Only later was she able to articulate that the problem lay in the fact that she had, as she put it, no “schema”, no meaningful thought process into which to put the information. She lowered her voice to “confess” that she had never heard of referencing another scholar’s work or commenting on it, before she found herself in this class.

This student was able to make a comparison between this experience and an earlier one in China in which she had completely failed to understand a reading passage in English because it was about a dishwasher and she had never seen or imagined one. Now, however, she felt that the problem was not simply in a lack of content knowledge, but was within her *self*. The schema she was missing here was, as she saw it, not located simply in her learning needs, but was experienced as a void inside her. Beginning her postgraduate study with no compulsory reading list, an assignment ahead and no idea what was expected of her, her panic was at its height. “Then I worry indeed,” she wrote, “since my mind is totally blank and I sit through the first few lectures feeling myself just like a fly without its head”.

A committed and perceptive Japanese PhD student wrote in her learning journal that all her written drafts had been approved by a wonderfully supportive supervisor who then recommended their inclusion in an appendix to her thesis:

I wrote definitions, background of my topic, the literature review and methodology. To my disappointment, all went to the appendix. I knew that the problem came from a cultural gap, but I didn’t know how to leap from a Japanese way to an Australian way.

Following modelling and explanation, she quickly understood what was required but this was a very small step in her journey:

I got so easily a clear idea how to improve my draft. Then I began to put my own voice in my writing. I didn’t know, however, how to organize the writing with my own opinion. It caused disorder in my draft. When I presented only information and other people’s ideas, at least people could understand what was written, even though they could not understand what I was going to say

about it. It is like swimming with no breaths. I can swim effectively so long as I do not breathe. But once I take a breath, my swimming form will break down completely. In the same way, my writing broke down as soon as I put in my voice.

Perhaps these difficulties emerged because, in redrafting, this student was trying to reform an already *culturally* inappropriate text, as distinct from editing a *structurally* inappropriate one. When she began to feel her English academic composition take flight, she explained it was because of talks with her host father and others who, she wrote, “never gave up trying to understand *me*”. She felt her host father had enjoyed her spoken opinions and he finally said, “I can see you do have your own ideas in your head. They don’t easily come out because of language barriers, do they?” Clearly, as Fan Shen (1989), and Ballard and Clanchy (1988: 7) have suggested, it is a consciously “personal” perspective which inspires the textual choices available to the community of writers in the social sciences, and dictates all the language in which this culture of knowledge is expressed.

### Pedagogical Implications

So, what are the implications for pedagogy in this context? In my own teaching I have begun to encourage students to express a personal voice in both oral and written texts about their research material even though their conventional genres may not use personal language.

There has been considerable debate in past years about the advantages and disadvantages of the academic convention of writing impersonally (Raymond 1993; Webb 1992), but for the majority of social science students, impersonal language is very often a fact of life. Taylor (1989: 144) advises his readers specifically that academic writing in these fields should constitute an account of the writer’s own justified judgements and beliefs, that “nothing is to be gained by making this explicit” and that “I is best used sparingly” in the finished product. However, I have found that one of Flower’s (1981) early suggestions, the WIRMI (“what I really mean is”) focus, is particularly fertile for my students. Expressing “what they really mean” seems to happen much more easily for them when they are given, and give themselves, permission to use the personal pronoun “I” quite freely. Ivanic and Simpson (1992: 144–145) explain clearly how the process of returning to the “I” fosters academic inquiry in a positive way:

By the “I” we mean recognizing that writers not only construct their texts but are also constructed by them . . . The “I” makes you write your ideas, thoughts and convictions . . . finding an “I” in writing also helps you to find clarity. [It] is a very simple tool for doing this because it lets you stand away from the writing and look at what you are trying to say.

This personal process can be usefully initiated in students’ writing in a learning journal (see Lee 1990) or in correspondence. The constructed “I”



can even be sustained in early drafts of thesis chapters where supervisors are receptive to the idea that such writing is using language positively as a thinking resource (Nightingale 1988; Jackson 1991). Then, for those contexts in which, as Raymond (1993: 482) argues, “the appearance of objectivity is a persuasive move . . . [which] adds power to the argument”, it is not a large step to guide the students, alone and in collaborative groups, to reformulate their developing arguments in terms of impersonal language structures. In practice, as Taylor (1989: 146) himself concedes, beginning with a personal stance helps the students to define more clearly for themselves their relationship with the material, with other scholars’ judgements on it and with their readers. It engages the students in what Rodby (1990) has called “a dialectic of identity and difference” and thus it can be a vital key to self-discovery in the academic context.

For over a year a Thai tertiary Business English teacher, a PhD student of linguistics, and I were involved in reflecting together on the ways in which we use academic language differently to express our thoughts on the subjects of interest to us. We used genre models as discussed by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), and we had regular consultations on the conventionally impersonal drafts she was submitting to her supervisor. Significantly, however, we also corresponded personally in between.

This student initially explained that her communicative aim in her draft chapters was to relate her ideas smoothly to each other so that her reader could clearly understand the results of her data. She wrote telling me how “particular” and “careful” she knew she had to be about “other people’s work” so she wanted to be very specific about “my work/contribution”. Despite her understanding of genre, her writing in these early drafts was reproductive, constrained and hesitant.

In her personal writing, however, this student gradually moved away from the cautious stance she had originally taken, to use much more authoritative language. As she explored her writing processes, she came to conclude that we “differ not in what, but only in aspects and how. That’s why I think cross-cultural differences are a matter of degree, not kind”. Her interest and confidence grew, as, under her control, we drew up a schema using personal language to chart her main contentions about her data. She was able to experiment with different linguistic expressions of a slowly modifying communicative purpose.

Perhaps because of our sustained personal correspondence, the student became more and more comfortable with this kind of redrafting. She became more confident of composing with her own voice in the text, eventually expressing in impersonal language a strong view which her data would support. In one letter she explained very clearly what was happening for her:

You know, Kate, I have just woken. And it’s clear to me that I’ve been too concerned about details (the exact description of details) and forgot to make sense of them in the big picture explicitly in public . . . I know it in theory but

not in practice. Now I think I've started to feel that the whole matter is the practice of your brain to be critical at every moment when you write (when you put [clothe?] the ideas into words, sentences . . .). It's the turning/training of your mind . . .

What was especially significant for me about these reflective insights was the unconsciously close link which the student made between her intellectual learning process (we rarely discussed anything other than her thesis in our consultations) and her sense of her own identity:

How nice to have had a (turkey) talk with you today. You know, whenever I have the chance to talk with you I feel much better. I don't mind how far I can go but I really love this process . . . You are the only person that I can share my thought/thinking and you understand *me* (my being).

The search for language in which to express ideas is naturally envisaged here as an extension of self.

### Conclusion

I still find the interplay between knowledge, language and identity, complex and blurred. However, developing teaching contexts for international students which give priority to the interrelationships between them has been heartening for me. I have found that in such contexts, a reflexive, personal composing process can help international postgraduates to build a bridge between the internal dialogue of self-review which students exchanging cultures must experience, and the external challenges presented by the new academic environment. In this respect I feel that such reflexivity offers these students a valuable opportunity to develop a more confident English language identity and to gain greater control over their entry into the discourse communities of their choice.

*(Revised version received February 1996)*

### REFERENCES

- Anderson, J., & Poole, M. (1994). *Thesis and assignment writing* (2nd ed.). Brisbane, Qld: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1988). Literacy in the university: An anthropological approach. In G. Taylor, B. Ballard, V. Beasley, H. Bock, J. Clanchy & P. Nightingale (Eds.), *Literacy by degrees* (pp. 7–23). Milton Keynes, UK: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas*. Melbourne, Vic: Longman Cheshire.
- Bhatia, V. J. (1993). *Analysing genre: Language use in professional settings*. New York: Longman.

- Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. A., & Wesche, M. B. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction*. New York: Newbury House.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fan Shen (1989). The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 40, 459–466.
- Flower, L. (1981). *Problem-solving strategies for writing*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich.
- Fox, H. (1994). *Listening to the world: Cultural issues in academic writing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Halliday, M. K., & Hasan, R. (1975). *Language, context and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Melbourne, Vic: Deakin University Press.
- Ivanic, R., & Simpson, J. (1992). Who's who in academic writing? In N. Fairclough (Ed.), *Critical language awareness* (pp. 141–173). New York: Longman.
- Jackson, M. W. (1991). Writing as learning: Reflections on student's writing strategies. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 10, 41–52.
- Lee, W. (1990). Journal writing: Options and reflections. *EA Journal*, 8, 14–22. (*EA Journal* is a publication of the ELICOS Association of Australia. Their address is EA Executive Office, 3, Union Street, Pyrmont, New South Wales 2009, Australia.)
- Lu, Min-zhan. (1987). From silence to words: Writing as struggle. *College English*, 49, 437–448.
- Masden, M. (1983). *Successful dissertations and theses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nightingale, P. (1988). Language and learning: A bibliographical essay. In G. Taylor, B. Ballard, V. Beasley, H. Bock, J. Clanchy & P. Nightingale (Eds.), *Literacy by degrees* (pp. 65–81). Milton Keynes, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Raymond, J. C. (1993). I-dropping and androgyny: The authorial I in scholarly writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 44, 478–483.
- Rodby, J. (1990). The ESL writer and the kaleidoscope self. *Writing Instructor*, 10, 42–50.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J., & Feake, C. (1994). *Academic writing for graduate students: A course for non-native speakers of English*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Taylor, G. (1989). *The student's writing guide for the arts and social sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for*

*an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Webb, C. (1992). The use of the first person in academic writing: Objectivity language and gate keeping. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17, 747–752.

Yancey, K. B. (Ed.). (1994). *Voices on voice: Perspectives, definitions, inquiry*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

**Kate Cadman** is Coordinator of the Integrated Bridging Program for International Postgraduates at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. She has taught English language, literature and ESL at universities and colleges in the UK and Australia, and she has written several papers on teaching academic writing.