

## The Role of the Teacher as Students Struggle for Participation and a 'Voice' in the Writing of their B.A. Thesis in English<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Academic writing in an English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom involves far more than students producing appropriate and grammatically accurate language and mastering composition skills. Students need to find their own 'voice' in the target language by struggling for participation (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) and even resisting teacher power. Addressing this issue, the present paper is a comparative study based on students from the B.A. programs in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at two representative Mexican universities, *Universidad de Guadalajara (U de G)* and *Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca (UABJO)*. This study focuses on the students' act of writing their B.A. *thesis* or counterpart document such as *report* (all of which will be referred to as "thesis") in order to fulfill graduation requirements. Although this research is focused on B.A. thesis writing, it has implications for all writing activity in a foreign language.

### Introduction

In Mexico, B.A. programs in TEFL normally focus on a conventional recipe of needs analysis, syllabus design, teaching methodology, language development, and so on. This didactic-oriented approach fails to understand what learners personally undergo as they express themselves in the target language of English. This article discusses the potential conflicts that students suffer at the end of their B.A. in TEFL, at which time they must express themselves through the academic text of the thesis, which is to be written in English. Beyond ensuring the student's degree completion, the thesis, as the student's most exhaustive academic work, becomes the playing field on which the student consciously exerts her/his "professional competence in discipline-legitimated discursive practices" and hence undergoes an initiation into the academy of TEFL teacher/researchers who, as in any discipline, will continually be impelled "to give a tangible and public demonstration that one has legitimacy" primarily by "textualising one's work" (Hyland, 2000, pp. 10, 177). Such an ideal, seemingly out of reach for the B.A. student wrestling with the thesis, translates into the development of academic writing skills.

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Yet all too often academic writing is seen purely in terms of language accuracy (e.g. grammar and lexis), sentence-level discourse (e.g. connectors) and textual organization (e.g. topic sentences). Teacher training pays scant attention to the B.A. student as a writer struggling to convey her/his ideas in the second language (L2). To address this problem, we will focus on the B.A. in TEFL students from *Universidad de Guadalajara* (U de G) and from *Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca* (UABJO). We will discuss 1) the thesis writer's search for forms of participation, 2) the thesis writer's attempts to find a voice, and 3) the implications for the teacher.

### Participation of the writer

Academic writing invites the student participating as an L2 user, expressive writer, and academic student. In these roles, the student brings values, attitudes and experiences from her/his first language which may support or undermine the L2 experience. This presents a fundamental problem that can be seen in terms of Slard's (1998) distinction between the acquisition metaphor and participation metaphor. The acquisition metaphor perceives the students as accumulating knowledge as individuals. If this were to be the only characteristic of academic writing, the student would adopt a passive role as she/he learns from the 'expert' (i.e. teacher). In contrast, the participation metaphor sees a much more active learning role as the L2 writer reflects on and evaluates her/his own writing within the dialogue of an academic community. Obviously both acquisition and participation are key elements for the student who needs to know the structure, mechanics and skills of writing in order to express herself/himself as an L2 writer with her/his own voice.

### Voice

The academic writer can be an anonymous entity or an individual with opinions and attitudes. Although the TEFL student as writer often feels intimidated in conveying her/his own Self, these two poles of anonymity and individuality nevertheless prevail; and the student will assume a position between them. She/he will strive or at least desire to establish her/his own individuality in the written text, thereby "gaining one's voice" in order to first resist "the dominant discourses" and then to create "a space for one's voice within that discourse" (Canagarajah, 1999, pp. 31, 183; italics in original text), perhaps going so far as "voicing" themselves as a way to "transform both their lives and the social system that excludes them" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 101).

As such, *voice* is paramount. To assert her/his voice, the student engages as an L2 user as well as academic writer (Campbell 1996). This struggle materializes on the surface of the written narrative, in the form of paragraph development and sequencing, sentence combinations, syntax, and word usage. These elements collectively create what the rhetoricians of the 1970s

called *tone*. This is "the attitude of the writer toward his audience and his material," which generally would be casual, informal, or formal, or some degree or manifestation thereof, such as modest or humorous, possibly including a deliberate or inadvertently negative posture such as "judgmental, patronizing, [and] dogmatic" (Hairston, 1974, pp. 113, 115). These "emotional shadings of a piece of writing" are established by "the way you convey your attitude to the audience" – that is, by "your language" (Winterowd, 1975, pp. 144, 255), whose linguistic and rhetorical elements ultimately expand the attitude or tone into a wider posture such as a homage to seriousness, a call to humanism, or an effort to resist the hegemony of L1 imperialism.

## Context

The B.A. programs of both U de G and UABJO train EFL teachers for the private and public educative sectors at the elementary, junior-high, high school, and university levels. U de G currently has a total of 117 students with an average of 25 annual graduates; and UABJO, 523 students and an average of 35 annual graduates. Aged between 18 and 20, most students of both universities come into the B.A. program from high school with little or no previous teaching experience; most of the courses and the students' coursework are in English. In their last year, the U de G and UABJO students complete a seminar during which they work on their thesis or counterpart document (as stated before, by "thesis" we refer to all the various documents).

Both universities offer a range of options. In addition to the *thesis* (U de G, 15,000 words; UABJO, 10,000 words), the U de G and UABJO coincide on the options of *theoretical-practical examination*, *teaching practice portfolio*, *development of educational material*, and *report* (at U de G, regarding teaching experience, 11,250 words; at UABJO, regarding teaching experience or a field research project, 8,750 words). UABJO differs from U de G in that it includes *autobiographical memoirs of teaching experience* as well as *original course book*; while U de G differs in its inclusion of *academic excellence* (a grade average of more than 90 per cent) in lieu of a written document or examination. At U de G, over the past two years, most students have graduated through *academic excellence*, *report*, and *teaching practice portfolio*; and at UABJO, *thesis*, *report*, and *teaching practice portfolio*.

## Methodology

This paper reflects a qualitative approach to research as we conducted taped interviews of students and added our own personal reflection based on our experience of teaching academic and thesis writing since 1999. This qualitative process goes beyond the fundamental role of the participant as provider of discourse and investigator as filter through which to reflect on that discourse; in particular, the methodology follows a more 'introspective' type of qualitative

research in that the students' and our own perspectives interact and form a mutual praxis of "observing and reflecting on one's thoughts, feelings, motives ... [and] reasoning processes" (Nunan, 1992, p. 115).

## Results

### *Participative practices*

Both U de G and UABJO seem to develop the L2 writer as an acquirer of writing practices rather than a participant in a community of academic writers with first language experiences, values, and histories. These L2 writers feel more obligated to satisfy the teacher rather than to develop their own style. Carlos (U de G) says: "Unfortunately sometimes teachers ... tell us that we have to ... follow some rules and to keep going on the structure of the introductory paragraph. For example, in writing, um, in some cases we don't have the chance to talk about what we want to do or do it in our own styles." Carlos succumbs to the teacher's guidance even though he would prefer to go with his own instincts on developing his thesis project. Carlos' sense of loss or dismay is echoed by Alma (UABJO), who alludes that her preliminary bibliographic and field research was a chore with which she could not entirely identify: "The tutor told me I had to read some books, check internet before I began. I had to interview teachers and learners to have my feedback, to read and back up my ideas." In the interview, Alma also mentioned that on several occasions she had glanced through student theses in the school library, which had helped her to form her own ideas for her thesis project; but Alma soon abandoned this type of participant-oriented method when she received the tutor's instructions on "how to do the interview." The acquisition metaphor overpowers Alma primarily because she wanted "to do a good and credible project" and "was worried about it."

The primary worry of Alma and the other UABJO and U de G students is their written English. They perceive their teachers as editors and consequently grapple to express themselves while taking into account the expected teacher reaction to their work. For instance, Susana (U de G) says that "sometimes I would like to write in my own way but I think that for the project, how we are going to present it?"; and although Yadira (UABJO) says that "I don't mind much the grammar being changed, but not in the way it goes into my content," she eventually coincides with classmate Karen's (UABJO) surrender-like comment that "I would not have advanced, just wouldn't've finished, without the English corrections." The conflict between one's own way of expressing oneself and the demands of the 'project' promotes a master-apprentice model which subordinates the individual to the demands of the academic writing.

### **Writers' voice**

The voice of the student is controlled externally by the teacher and/or internally by the student herself/himself in terms of what she/he wants to or thinks she/he should do. In U de G, Carlos, at the onset of his thesis project, felt controlled by the teacher who had imposed on him a product rather than process approach: "... [Y]ou give to her some draft ... then she gives it back to us. We have to correct and write again. And at the end we get our final grade." Carlos implies that as a result of this procedure of redrafting rather than finding an appropriate or effective way to express ideas, he eventually, as his work progressed, found it difficult to assert his individuality: "In writing, um, in some cases we don't have the chance to talk about what we want to do or do it in our own styles."

Caving in to perceived teacher pressure and to some extent sacrificing their 'Self' because their "teacher was strict in class" (Alma, UABJO) and "it is going to affect my grade if I don't" (Carlos, U de G), the students feel that even though they may disagree with the teacher's comments on linguistic and rhetorical issues deeper than "the use of words for informal and formal" (Felipe, UABJO) and "details of prepositions, adverbs of time and the like" (Yadira, UABJO), they are not in a position to argue. Pedro (U de G) comments: "The teacher always has the power.... I think I have to adapt to the teacher ... because this is as I am learning so I accept that." Therefore, rather than being able to explore ways of conveying themselves through academic writing, the writer's voice of the student becomes subdued by having 'to adapt' to teacher power. This reflects a lost opportunity to develop and encourage L2 writers to develop their own academic voice – their voice that is ever present, on the verge of surfacing. As Felipe (UABJO) says, "The teacher's corrections are O.K. to a point, but not to change what I mean to say."

### **Implications for the Teacher**

Teachers need to realize, first of all, that by concentrating too much on the acquisition dimension to writing, students often feel, as Carlos (U de G) does, that they are not participating as academic writers: "They are telling us to improve something and maybe that's the opposite of what I was trying to say. But well I have to accept it because he is the one giving me my grade and he's the one who tells me what is correct or not." Carlos and others such as Miguel of the UABJO who would prefer "to write the drafts only thinking about content and not grammar" should be allowed much more autonomy in their plan of action from the onset. As TEFL students in Mexico, inhabiting what Canagarajah (1999) terms as the linguistic and discursive "periphery," they "already come to classrooms with a range of center-based academic and other discourses" from their L1, "so what they need is not another product-oriented introduction ... but ways" of working "creatively and critically" (ibid, p. 168).

Secondly, by promoting the student's creative and critical approach to writing, the teacher would help students "to negotiate conflicting discourses in their struggle for voice" (ibid). The teacher should be attuned to the moment when the voice begins to emerge, as in the case of Roman (U de G): "*I am presenting one idea but then, well, then after checking I have to explain why did I do that. So after explaining my idea I think they will have my idea.*" Thereafter, Roman and others need assistance in developing their abilities to express their voices in the thesis. The first step for the teacher would be aware of the different voices that a student may express as a L2 user, an essay writer or a researcher. There are, for instance, the voices of **subservience** ("*They make some changes when I don't want it but at the time they are changing it I realize yeah*"; Pedro, U de G) and **anxiety** ("*I am worried about my English*"; Alma, UABJO).

Third, once familiar with the students' own voices, the teacher can then better see the narrative voice of the student wandering between those iron poles of anonymity and individuality within the text of the thesis in progress. At this point, the teacher or thesis tutor should establish the limits of her/his reach. She/he should be responsible yet cautious and respectful of the student's text, as would be Clemente (1998) who suggests that a thesis tutor should correct only those grammatical and rhetorical elements, such as incorrect prepositions, articles, and transitional words, that interfere with the transmission of meaning. As the student's voice then begins to take form and assume legitimacy, the teacher should then reconsider various discourse-related preconceptions such as the preference for formal register as well as foster tolerance and acceptance of what may appear as post-colonial English (Clemente & Higgins, 2007).

## Conclusion

As B.A. students in TEFL seek out their own ways of manifesting their voice, their thesis cannot be seen as a product, that is, the result of acquisition. Based on the representative contexts of *Universidad de Guadalajara* and *Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca*, one can conclude that B.A. students in Mexico do not have sufficient opportunity to participate within a community of writers who make themselves heard and convey particular attitudes in the narrative text. This perhaps explains why thesis writing, as well as much of EFL writing in general, is often unrewarding, non-communicative, and affectless on the student's identity. In countering this problem, the teacher or thesis tutor should recognize that "voice ... has to do with gaining the agency to express one's life" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 130), in this case, for the B.A. student, a forthcoming professional 'life' in TEFL whose theoretical, reflective, and critical stances will first take shape in the thesis document.

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