

Writing Across Borders

Film Transcription

Introduction

Beginning narration 00:38

It is August at Oregon State University, and the international students in this classroom are busy preparing for fall term. Today, they are learning how to write papers that will meet American expectations. For them, completing an essay not only means operating in a language other than their native tongue, it also means operating in a cultural and educational system quite different than what they are used to.

Jean Kaunda is familiar with the wide range of challenges that face international students as they write for American classrooms. Now finishing her Ph.D. studies in Public Health, she notes that some of her experiences were frustrating.

Jean Frustrating Experiences 1:13

One of my first essays in one of my nutritional class was to write this critical essay about the school lunch program in one of the middle schools here in Corvallis. For me it was hard because we were suppose to write, to criticize, the way they serve the foods to the children, whether it's nutritionally balanced, whether they follow the federal regulations. So, for me, it was so hard to criticize, to write everything: they don't follow this, they are not supposed to do this, they don't do this, because if I go back to my country, where I come from, Malawi, before 1994, it was so hard for us to criticize anything related to the government. It was so hard because if we do that, most of the time, people are arrested or something was done to them by the government. So, I didn't write it as critical as my professor wanted it to be so I got a bad grade on that one because I think it wasn't deep enough critically.

Narration:

Despite the challenges that students like Jean face, international students continue to come to the United States to study in large numbers. In 2004, for example, over 600,000 students from other countries were studying in American colleges. Nationwide, that means that 1 in 20 students are from another country. At many schools that number is closer to 1 in 10. But while the presence of international students is changing American classrooms, very little is done to prepare teachers.

Part I: Examining Cultural Differences in Writing

Narration:

Most scholars would agree that research into culture and writing began with the publication of Robert Kaplan's 1966 article, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." In it, Kaplan introduced the idea of contrastive rhetoric, the notion that people use different rhetorics when they write within different cultures. He went so far as to draw diagrams representing how people from different cultures write.

The article created a flurry of interest and research, but it also drew criticism about oversimplification and that it might lead people to think ethnocentrically. The consensus now is that while it's important not to make assumptions that all students from a particular country or region will all write alike that it's just as important not to overlook culture either. By doing that, it's easy to assume that American preferences in writing are natural or the most logical way to do things, when they are in fact shaped by culture, political values, and educational practices, as well as a 2,000 year rhetorical tradition dating back to Plato and Aristotle. For students from other cultures and rhetorical traditions, the values and expectations of American writing are anything but natural.

Maho Japanese Organization 2:07

The Japanese traditional writing style is a little bit different from American writing style and the way I learned in my elementary school is that Japanese essay should be divided up into four parts which is ki, sho, ten, ketsu. There's a very famous Japanese poem that teaches us how to write Japanese essays, and this is the way that I learned. The title is "The Daughters at the String Shop." And ki part is "there are two daughters at the string shop in Osaka" and sho part is "the oldest daughter is 16 years old, and the youngest daughter is 14 years old" and this is the ten part, "Japanese samurai will kill their enemy with arrows" and ketsu part is "Japanese daughters at string shop will kill guys by their eyes." So in ten part, we suddenly start talking about totally different thing from the thesis, so readers can surprise. What are we talking about, it's totally different from the story about the Japanese daughters, but when you come to the conclusion, you can see how this part is connect to the conclusion part. So ten part takes really really important role in Japanese essays. This is the way we get the attention from the reader.

Anna Looping Organization 1:38

Ah what I have noticed is that Americans will usually introduce their main point or say exactly what they want to say right at the beginning. It's almost like organizing in their introduction their main point and then they develop their main point. Well in Ecuador what we would like to do or what we sometimes tend to do is that we don't present the main point at the beginning. We go around it and around it until we finally get to the point which is in the middle. It's kind of like this idea of circularity. We go around it and around it until we get to it. A good example of this is if I

want to talk about... let's say that yesterday I went to a party and two guys were fighting. This is how an Ecuadorian would tell the story. Ah I will start with saying remember Pablo...Remember how Pablo used to be in love with Mary. And remember Juan and remember that he also liked Mary. Well yesterday when we went to the party, they started drinking and you know and I will go on and give all these details and maybe by the time I tell you yes Pablo and Juan got in a fight because of Mary, you already have a complete idea of maybe 95% of what I'm trying to tell you. In the case of an American, if I meet somebody for coffee and it's a good friend of mine and we sit down, she will just go ahead and tell me, "You know what Anna, you know what happened yesterday. Juan and Pablo got in a fight because of Mary."

Narration:

Organizational preference is perhaps the most visible way culture influences writing. That's why scholars like Kaplan focused on it. But culture influences writing in ways that go beyond organization. For example, on the most global level, it shapes reader expectations and helps define which writing practices are acceptable and which are not.

Khan:

In Vietnam, you risk the chance of being penalized if you go outside the classroom and put in extra information other than what is lectured in the class from the teachers. An example was when I was younger I was given a topic of writing about a typical meeting in the classroom and just describing a class meeting. And so I was here in the classroom writing about the atmosphere of the class. And I thought that wasn't enough. So I looked out the window and I started writing about the schoolyard, how peaceful it is during the study hours and I started mentioning about the trees and the leaves falling. And I got marked down for that because I wasn't supposed to write about outside the classroom.

In the United States, for example in my history of medicine class, I didn't do very well as I thought I would on my paper, on my first paper, because I didn't go outside the classroom and find extra information to put down in my paper. So the main difference here is that extra information and the students own opinions are so valuable in essays.

Pablo Rude Writing

Well I think Americans are really direct, sometimes they are seem to be rude to me looking from a Colombian perspective. Let's say when I'm walking in the street in Colombia in Bogota, my city, if I meet somebody on the street I stop and if I saw a man I shake his hand, and if I saw a woman I kiss her. Here, people just pause and they don't say hello. Sometimes they ask me "How are you doing?" and they don't wait for my response, so I think that's kind of rude. That is reflected in the way Americans write papers. They go straight to the point, they don't take the time to establish a relationship between writer and reader, and I think that's important in my culture. I have a personal example: Two weeks ago I wrote an email to my friends in Colombia, and I asked them when was the birthday of one of our friends and I went straight to the point, I didn't say anything else, and they reply was

you are so rude, so impolite, you didn't ask us how we were doing, you didn't say anything about you, and they were right. They were completely right.

Maho Reader's Job 1:12

American writing it is very important for you to make everything very clear, but in Japanese writing this is a bit different because readers are supposed to participate the story much more than American writing. It means that, for example, that in Japanese writing there are so many pronouns. And there are so many pronouns but this is the reader's job to understand what this he is and what this she is and what this it refers to. I tend to do that in American writing, in English essays, and everyone asks me who this he is and who this she is.. I don't understand, but for me, guess what, this is your job to understand it. But this is a really different part. In American writing, writers have a lot of responsibility for their writing, but in Japanese writing, readers have more responsibility to understand and participate in the story.

Narration:

Khan, Pablo, and Maho illustrate just how much expectations can vary from culture to culture. But preferences for style and word choice can have an equally dramatic impact on written communication, particularly in an academic environment. For international students, the kind of voice, style and tone that American instructors expect is often much different than what they've been taught or what feels natural.

Setenay Turkish Writings 0:51

In America I have noticed that the writing professors want short, concrete, understandable sentences. That's the way to write your composition. But in Turkish, what we do is we use long and elaborate sentences because we think that it's more poetic and it flows better that way, and you read it for the sake of getting some kind of a pleasure out of it, not necessarily just to understand the point. And also, we pay attention to the fact that we need to have these essays look good, so we have different punctuations that are just designed for visual pleasure, like three dots, when you write a sentence, you end it with three dots that indicates that the thought goes on.

Jordan Exaggerate 1:04

Actually exaggeration is acceptable in the Arabic way. On the contrary it is sometimes acceptable or preferred to use exaggeration. It helps the writer to write. It helps him to express his feelings and describe whatever he wants to describe and to attract the reader to his writing. And the reader would think the writer is a good writer. And, as example of that, "He has money enough to fill the sea." Actually nobody has money enough to fill the sea but that indicates that he is rich. Unfortunately, American teachers maybe won't see this point of writing and they would take that the American

way is the only way. No there is a lot of ways in the world. And they might deduct points or it might affect their evaluation of the student that he doesn't know how to write.

Lily Citation 1:12

I've noticed that citation is a very big part of academic papers here in the United States. People are very aware of the copyright issues, what the source is, where is it from, what picture is this magazine from and very detailedly cite everything. But in China it's not a big thing at all, I would just say for example an article I don't remember who said this, but this is roughly the sentence or just place a picture inside of my article without citing the source. And the more I think about it I think a big part of the reason is because the cultural differences because in China we are so used to sharing everything and we're a country with 45000 years of Asian culture and also on top of that we are having communism the idea of that is everybody is supposed to be able to share everything so it's just very common and natural for people to think it's okay to share.

Setenay Format and Guidelines 0:57

When I first got here and started my college education, and started taking writing lessons, I was really surprised at all the format and guidelines I had to pay attention to because you had to do everything in a certain way like 12 font and double spacing and all these things I'd never learned before I had never used a computer before I came here and I was really surprised about that because there's all these guidelines you have to follow and all these formats you have to pay attention to but then again America we look up to the education system they have in America because it's more free and it's more relaxed so I was surprised to find out that they can be just as strict as our countries.

Narration:

Addressing cultural issues isn't an easy task. It's difficult to determine when a student's cultural background is playing itself out in writing, and even more difficult to decide how much to adapt teaching style to accommodate cultural differences. However, one thing is clear: teachers cannot take for granted that all students, particularly those from other countries, will have the same expectations and preferences for writing. The problem is complex and must be addressed on an individual basis.

Part II: Assessing International Students' Writing

Tony Silva Accepting Accents 1:32

People often ask you know I have a class with a couple of non native speakers in it but mostly native speakers of English. What do I do when I try to assess them. I mean, should I try to hold everyone to the same standard. Realistically, I don't that is a realistic thing to do. What I would suggest is instead of having everyone work at the same level would be to make some decision in your class about what would be good enough, not what would be perfect or what would be without flaw but what would be good enough for your class. And then, when you look at things that way, you can be less distracted by small things in people's papers that might cause you to rate them lower. For example, people accept that someone from a foreign country might speak with a foreign accent. I think it's just as fair to suggest that people will write with an accent. And usually that accent consists of things like missing articles or wrong preposition or things like that. Things that really don't make much difference.

Healey Grammar 1:45

In grading international students, and being fair, grammar always comes up as a question this is no doubt because you notice it. One of the things we try to focus on is how comprehensible are the ideas, is the grammar getting in the way? If someone is writing or speaking and you don't know when something's happening and that's important to know, well maybe they need to get dinged for that because you have a loss of comprehensibility; the message is not getting through. If it's a question of putting an 's' on a third person like he goes rather than he go, we're going to figure out it is what it is with or without the 's.' The other classic one is the article system in English, which I believe like many others is designed mostly to show who is a native speaker, not to serve any communicative function, so making a mistake in whether you forget to put an 'a' or you put a 'the' inappropriately is pretty more than minor, it's inconsequential I'd say 99 percent of the time. So to say that oh you're being equal is not necessarily being fair. To be fair to international students you take into account that this is a second language for them and you hold them to the same standards of meaning and quality of thought and content but you say well how many of the errors being made really detract from meaning.

Narration:

Probably the most important thing to remember when assessing international students is to consider the many linguistic subtleties that native speakers take for granted. Most of these errors aren't easily explained by rules and must simply be memorized.

These mistakes often appear in prepositions following verbs, such as "I turned my paper on to my teacher" instead of "I turned my paper in." Other times, students may use words in ways that native speakers find awkward or confusing, such as "the cowboy ascended" his horse instead of "mounted his horse."

These lexical errors are easy to grade because they are easy to spot. But marking down for them is counterproductive because it discourages learning. It frustrates students who have written an otherwise thoughtful and intelligent piece by marking them down for errors they can't avoid. It also stunts their language growth. In order to become proficient writers, international students must be bold in experimenting.

Part III: Developing Strategies that Work for International Students

Hitomi Time Problem 0:29

One thing I really struggle about writing in America is time. One time, I had to take an essay exam in class which was about slides. The teacher gave us only about 7 minutes per slide, so we had to write as quickly as possible, and it was really frustrating for me because I can't write that fast.

Healy Testing and Time 1:15

Testing is a real issue for international students. The things that most dramatically disadvantage them both in teaching and in testing are anything that asks for immediate response, and immediate thoughtful response. International students are just as good as anyone else at memorizing canned answers. I mean that's not the problem. They can come up with quick answers that are rote. Like anyone else can. But where you want something more thoughtful, either in a discussion or in writing, it takes longer because the processing time is longer. I don't see it as unfair to native speakers to say well we're going to do it in a different way for international students or to just structure the test differently so you give people more time. So if it means not having as many items within the stated amount of time giving more time, having more things that are perhaps take-home when you want real reflection to go on, I think this is a better approach. I think this helps not only international students but anybody who is not just geared for immediate production in text.

Narration

In addition to rethinking testing strategies, it's important for teachers to begin rethinking their own cultural assumptions. It's easy to forget, for example, that not everyone is aware of the cultural significance of Woodstock or is comfortable writing about politics, sex, religion, or other topics that come up frequently in American classrooms.

Hitomi Crafting Assignments 0:32

I think teachers should be careful about what they assign. When I took an introductory composition class, one of the assignments was reading articles about Jay Leno and David Letterman and to write a paper about them. And at that time I was in the United States only about one year so I didn't even know who were David Letterman or Jay Leno.

Tony Politics in the Classroom 0:55

Native speaker writing classrooms are often highly politicized that is the teacher wants it to be highly politicized. They want to talk about politics, institutions and so on and so forth. And a lot of people want to take that over into a second language but they don't realize that it is such a dangerous issue, you can make people feel so uncomfortable. Here's somebody coming from China, and you want them to critique something about American institutions. The person's thinking, "When I go to the United States, I'm going to do what they tell me so I don't get in trouble." And then you have the teacher saying, "I'd like you to critique this American institution." First of all, the students might not know much about it. Secondly, the student may not want to talk about it at all. So, that's an issue that we don't talk about enough I think. Because writing in the United States, teachers really want to politicize it, and for good reasons. But it's really iffy to make that transition over to another group.

Narration:

Adapting teaching and testing practices can be challenging, since the goal is to acknowledge fundamental differences in culture and language. But some of the best ways to help international students succeed are easy to implement.

Vicki Asking the Student 0:58

In my classes, one of the first things I do with international students is to ask them to meet with me individually. I might ask a student about their own experiences as a writer in their own culture, whether they consider themselves a strong writer or not a strong writer in their own experience. they I also ask them how they're experiencing writing in the university and often, they're very worried about themselves as writers in English. And so, it's important to talk about what helps them the most to improve as writers. Often they know what helps them the most, so I say "How do you want me to respond on your papers? Do you want me to mark lots of errors? Or do you want me to just mark your papers the way I do any other student in the class?" Typically, the international students have a strong view of what helps them, they know. And it's not always the same answer.

Jose Constructive Criticism 1:10

Teachers, they can comment a lot of things in papers and they're very helpful sometimes and sometimes they're not. Teachers write a lot of comments. Especially they use pens like red pens, are very bright colors, so if you're a coming student for your first year, this is your first paper, I don't know if you may cry or not, but you're pretty discouraged after seeing a lot of

bad comments. And sometimes they are so small, there's more red than you actually wrote on the paper, so that's very sad. So I would feel like if the teachers would not cross out so many different small mistakes, they would put longer comments like sentence comments, "This sentence or this part would be a little tighter or more concessive if you would phrase it this way or if you take out this word, maybe replace it with another one." So that would be more helpful.

Tobin Faculty Action 0:31

Most of the doctors and professors know international students are having a hard time. But the problem is, they are very kind also, but the problem is they are not acting as they are thinking. So they know that we are having problems, but they are not doing anything. So I hope they're behavior and action will be the same as their thoughts and their expectations.

Narration:

Adapting classrooms for international students doesn't mean lowering standards or making the material easier. It doesn't require becoming an expert on culture or becoming well-versed in ESL techniques. What it does require is empathy for those students who come from different cultures and languages, and then predicting the difficulties they might have. It means making a conscious decision to think from other perspectives and then applying that knowledge to the classroom.

Healey International Students are an Advantage 0:46

One of the things that I think are very important for all of us to keep in mind is that so often faculty look at international students as a problem in their class. I think that this is an unfortunate viewpoint because in so many ways the richness that these other perspectives bring we cannot get any other way. When we as Americans are talking to other Americans, especially people who have all grown up in the same sort of environment or with the same background or talking to other people with the same background, we simply cannot see parts of the world or parts of reality in a different way.

During Credits

Deborah Healey Kaplan and Indian araga 0:24

I think of American writing as being in some ways like an Indian araga where the first phrase in araga sets out every note that will be played in the entire piece. In the same way an introduction in American writing academic writing sets out the themes that will be carried through the entire piece of writing. So it's not like we start at the beginning and get directly to the end, we start at the beginning, we've set the scene and as you go through the writing, you're bringing up different themes from the intro. Until you get to the end which was predicted in the beginning. So it's sort of like threads going through rather than ooh direct arrow all the way to the end. As native speakers/writers, we don't have any vision of how we do that.