

6 *Representing culture in the ESL writing classroom*

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By tradition and necessity, second language instruction often addresses cultural issues. As ESL teachers, we are often called upon to explain English-speaking cultures and cultural differences, and to help students adjust to the target culture. Yet, interpreting culture is a perilous enterprise that is neither clear-cut nor simple. This chapter illustrates some of the difficulties teachers face in discussing culture with their students. It shows how cultural representation is made more complex when participants in ESL writing classrooms include long-term residents whose experiences with and orientations toward American culture may be quite different from that of newcomers. It demonstrates how, in this context, views of culture that are implicitly conveyed by instructors and the curriculum may be met with resistance from students holding contending views. Furthermore, it shows how taking long-term residents' perspectives can shed light on both the potentials and the pitfalls inherent in addressing cultural issues in ESL writing instruction.

Language is inextricably bound up with culture. Cultural values are both reflected by and carried through language. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that representation of culture implicitly and explicitly enters into second language teaching. This chapter is about ESL college writing classrooms. How is culture typically dealt with in these classrooms – what elements or ideas do they emphasize? Perhaps the most-examined and best-documented aspect of culture in ESL writing pedagogy pertains to norms for writing and how these norms are manifested in the linguistic and rhetorical features of texts. Research has demonstrated that differing expectations for prose structure across cultures manifest themselves in rhetorical style, purpose, task, topic, and audience (see Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Hinkel, this volume; Kachru, this volume; Leki, 1991; Purves, 1988). Many of these expectations appear to be transferred when writing in a nonnative language. Thus, ESL writing instruction addresses cultural issues most explicitly in efforts to socialize L2 learners into expected cultural norms for academic texts in the target language.

Less examined, but perhaps equally pervasive, is another way in which the teaching and learning of culture enters into second language writing instruction. Because L2 writing classes typically bring together individuals

from a number of cultural backgrounds, intercultural communication and the norms and values associated with the target language may be areas of significant topical interest to learners. Thus, while teaching about culture may not be an explicit goal of most ESL writing courses, the cultural patterns and values nevertheless form a significant part of the content through which second language writing skills are taught. ESL writing classrooms serve as arenas for cultural orientation and brokerage, and ESL teachers often serve not only as writing instructors, but also as explainers and mediators of American culture and cultural values.

Culture is an elusive construct that shifts constantly over time and according to who is perceiving and interpreting it. Yet, teachers are often called upon to explain or name the target language culture. In doing so, they must in a sense reify their own interpretation of culture, making static something that is in constant flux, and making unified something that is inherently multiple. The resulting “representations” of culture appear both implicitly and explicitly in the work of ESL writing classrooms. Representations of culture are embedded in a broader sociocultural context that is imbued with differential power relationships, a context that both shapes and is shaped by the interactions of students and teachers in the classroom (see Auerbach & McGrail, 1991; Benesch, 1993; Canagarajah, 1993; Raimes, 1991). Thus, instructional practices representing culture in the classroom continually tread a thin line between informing students of cultural norms that will further their L2 writing development and ability to function as L2 writers in academic contexts, and prescribing and enforcing dominant cultural norms in and through writing.

The role of ESL writing teachers as cultural brokers and mediators has been shaped in large part by a newcomer clientele in need of basic cultural information and orientation. Increasingly, however, college ESL writing classrooms serve another group of students who are not novices to American culture. Since 1965, immigration laws favoring the relocation of entire family groups have resulted in growing numbers of school-age immigrants. Many of these students arrive in the United States in late elementary or secondary school and enter college while they are still in the process of attaining the level of English proficiency they need in order to function in college academic contexts. Colleges and universities have several options when placing these students in writing courses. In some settings, linguistic minority students who are American high-school graduates are placed in mainstream college composition alongside native speakers of English. In other settings, long-term residents who are non-native language writers are redirected into ESL classes, either in combination with international students or in classes designed specifically for them. With few exceptions (see Valdes, 1992), little consensus or even explicit discussion of these options has emerged in the literature. In this chapter, I discuss a study documenting what happens when long-term

U.S. resident language minority students are placed in ESL composition courses. I use these students' experiences as a means of illustrating the pitfalls we face in addressing cultural issues with language minority students, individuals who bring with them very different levels of familiarity with American culture and different cultural adjustment issues than their newcomer or international student peers. I will argue that their experiences have broad implications for the way teachers address culture in ESL writing classrooms.

Method

In 1994, I conducted a yearlong study to describe the transitions that ESL students make in the demands of reading and writing tasks as they move from high school to college. Four female subjects, three Vietnamese (Claudia, Penny, and Hanh) and one Turkish (Aeyfer), participated in the study.¹ All had attended the same western New York urban high school in spring 1994. The four were selected for the study with the assistance of the school's ESL teacher based on the likelihood that they would attend college after high school. Three of the subjects had come to the United States in sixth or seventh grade; one (Claudia) had arrived in second grade. The study employed ethnographic case study methodology. Students' experiences with and perceptions of high-school reading and writing demands across the curriculum were documented throughout the spring semester of their senior year in high school. The same students were then followed throughout fall semester as they made the transition to college-level tasks. Three of the students elected to study at nearby Lakeland Community College. Hanh enrolled at State University, just outside of the city. All four subjects enrolled full-time in fall 1994. All were placed in ESL writing courses that semester. Additionally, students at Lakeland were placed in ESL reading courses that also required composition assignments. In this chapter, I focus on writing instruction in these college ESL classes.

Data consisted of interviews, classroom observations, collections of students' work, field notes, and written artifacts collected from the study sites. Each student was interviewed between 10 and 13 times over the course of the study, and on five occasions each during fall semester, at 2–4-week intervals. Interviews typically lasted about 45 minutes, with some lasting up to 1½ hours. Each of the students' college instructors was interviewed as well. ESL faculty at Lakeland invited me to two meetings to discuss their concerns about the American high-school-educated students in their program. Each study participant's classes were observed twice.

1 A fifth subject who did not enroll in college was dropped from the study. All names are pseudonyms.

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Lakeland was a 2-year college with an enrollment of approximately 13,700 students. The college had a sizable ESL program, with 231 students, five full-time instructors and several part-time instructors. More than 30 different countries were represented in the student population, with the majority of the students originating in Southeast Asia and East Asia, and an increasing number from former Eastern bloc countries. They varied considerably in the academic training and socioeconomic status in their countries of birth, and although many were newcomers who had been in the United States for three years or less, a rising proportion were long-term residents. State University, where Hanh enrolled, was a 4-year institution with an enrollment of 5,700. Minority students formed a small proportion of the student body. Although there was no compulsory ESL program, nonnative language writers such as Hanh who entered through the Educational Opportunity Program were often directed by advisers into an English department course titled “English Language and Culture.”

Writing assignments in Lakeland Community College’s ESL reading and vocabulary courses were based on articles in the newspaper, a college ESL textbook consisting of short readings with a multicultural focus, and a novel (*Flowers for Algernon* [Keyes, 1966]). Writing courses utilized various composition and grammar texts intended for a college ESL audience. Instruction covered the organization, content, mechanics, and a substantial amount of grammar and error analysis. Students were instructed in archetypal genres: argumentative/persuasive, compare/contrast, and classification. The State University ESL writing course curriculum was similar. It included a college ESL grammar text from which students were assigned exercises. Writing in various expository genres was emphasized. Instructors at both institutions were experienced, knowledgeable, and thoughtful. Instruction in both contexts included sound pedagogical techniques such as dialogue journals, multiple drafting of writing assignments, portfolio assessment, peer editing, and utilizing computers in order to promote fluency and editing skills.

Nevertheless, the case study subjects were far from satisfied with their ESL courses. They found it difficult to articulate exact reasons. They all believed that their instructors were good teachers, and liked them on a personal level. They said they found much in the classes that was useful, and had no specific complaints about the materials or assignments. Yet, over the course of the semester, increasing irritation, frustration, and resentment crept into their accounts of what was happening in their college ESL classes. Likewise, classroom observations showed them to be listless, fidgety, and occasionally sullen. Aeyfer and Claudia used excuses for not attending class regularly, and Aeyfer left her homework until the last minute. They began to complain that the classes were boring and of limited use to them. Claudia wrote in her writing course journal, “I don’t like my advisor. I think that she gave me a wrong advise [sic] to take ESL 103 [reading] class. The class is too easy that it bored me.”

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In fact, students' behavior and attitudes were consonant with resistance – the sense of discomfort, perplexity, and frustration that occurs when students feel that “something deep and personal is threatened or offended” (Fox, 1994). Resistance can take many forms, and while some students may recognize what and why they are resisting, for many others resistance remains below the level of conscious recognition. Resistance in ESL writing classrooms has been linked with representations of culture. Many (e.g., Reid, 1993, pp. 139–140; Fox, 1994) have attributed it to students' reluctance to change their rhetorical patterns and logical style to better reflect American English cultural norms for expository prose. Some (Fox, 1994; Greene, 1993; Patthey-Chavez & Gergen, 1992; Rodby, 1992; Tucker, 1995) have further noted the affective difficulty that language minority writers may experience when asked to approximate the cultural norms of a discourse community that may nonetheless marginalize or exclude them. Accordingly, as I watched these students become increasingly discontented in class and spoke with teachers who were puzzled, concerned, or simply put off by students' behavior and attitudes, it seemed logical to examine how cultural representation was accomplished in the classroom. As I looked at manifestations of culture in writing assignments, class discussions, and student work, I came to see new significance in some of the very practices that our profession and I as a (nonimmigrant and nonminority) teacher have taken to be most mundane and self-evident. With the researcher's luxury of looking at these classroom practices through the eyes of students, I began to view some of these seemingly sensible, common practices as the very ones most likely to cause contention between culturally related perceptions, assumptions, and experiences of students and teachers, and thus the very ones most likely to precipitate student resistance. Despite these students' diverse instructors and different institutions, several strikingly consistent potential areas of contention ran throughout their experience in the classroom where: (1) Cultural orientation provided through reading and writing assignments was inappropriate for those already immersed in American culture; (2) assignments and class activities implied a polarization of cultures and cultural identity; (3) students' efforts to shape and articulate their own cultural identities conflicted with other classroom agendas; and (4) depictions of culture and cultural mixing were reductionist or one-dimensional. I will address each of these areas in turn.

Inappropriate cultural orientation

While teachers were aware that some of their students had already resided in the United States for a number of years, they nonetheless directed instruction toward the majority who had been in the United States for a relatively short time. As a result, through teacher talk and writing

assignments, they frequently proffered cultural orientation and cultural brokerage to long-term residents who neither wanted nor needed them. For example, the goals of the program at Lakeland Community College, as stated by one of the ESL writing teachers for a College Day information program, included not only “Through language study, to open the door to a college degree program” and “Better communication,” but also goals less related to academics than to cultural orientation: “Acculturation to life in America” and “Personal growth.” When asked about these goals, all three of the study participants attending the community college (Claudia, Penny, and Aeyfer) believed the latter two to be inappropriate. Claudia commented, “I don’t think ESL should be teaching those things. . . . What does this got to do with college, anyway?” Similarly, when asked if acculturation was an appropriate subject for ESL writing class, Aeyfer asserted, “you learn it the minute you come to the airport, really. So we learn it better than they teach at school, so they can’t really teach that to us.” The goal of acculturation and introducing the novice to American society was also evident in the name of the State University ESL writing course, “English Language and Culture.” The teacher noted that there was some ambiguity in the intended population and goals for the course. The title of the course indicated its original intent, which was to serve newcomers to the United States who were presumably in need of both English-language instruction and American cultural orientation. Although most of the students had turned out to be U.S. residents coming from American high schools, the original intent of the course was still reflected in its title and its curriculum.

Teacher talk frequently reflected the assumption that students were new to the United States. Hanh’s teacher often prefaced comments to the class with statements such as “As people new to American culture, . . .” Claudia and Penny’s reading teacher, discussing branches of the U.S. government, noted, “This will be important if you want to become citizens eventually.” In fact, Penny and Claudia were already U.S. citizens, and the comment only served to reinforce their impression that the class was not appropriate for them. Claudia’s teacher wrote in her journal that her writing was continuing to improve and she should keep practicing. While meant as encouragement, the teacher’s lack of acknowledgment of Claudia’s previous decade of “practicing” written English in U.S. educational contexts rendered such encouragement hollow.

Writing assignments often had an American cultural orientation component, assuming cultural novices as their audience. For example, Aeyfer was given an assignment to find a stranger, interview him or her, and then write a composition based on the interview. While the intent of the assignment was to coerce cultural novices into interacting with native speakers of English, the effect for Aeyfer and students like her was quite different. It was not a particular linguistic challenge, because she already

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interacted with native speakers in appropriate communicative contexts, such as conversing with fellow Travel and Tourism majors in her content area classes. For her, then, the assignment entailed simply an awkward imposition on a stranger. Aeyfer, who had kept all the books for her father's small business in the United States, was also given several assignments intended to orient students to American credit cards and banking. Similarly, Claudia was asked in one of her writing assignments to write a letter responding to a job want ad in the newspaper, with the assumption that newcomers to the United States need help in learning how to find employment. Considered in light of her impressive range of previous work experience in the United States, the assignment was not appropriate for Claudia.

It must be emphasized that teachers at Lakeland Community College and State University were not unaware that these students had different needs than did the newcomers. In fact, in conversations and meetings with them, they frequently expressed concern that they were not meeting those needs. Nevertheless, with more training and experience in dealing with newcomers, and with greater numbers of newcomers in their classes, they tended to respond to the majority whom they perceived to be in need of this sort of orientation.

When such cultural orientation assignments are given to long-term residents, they arguably go beyond simple irrelevance: They risk making students feel as if their experience in American culture does not count, that their teachers still implicitly consider them newcomers, and that they will always be considered newcomers. In response to curricula and instructional practices that seemed to ignore students' hard-won experience in American culture and render them perpetual newcomers, it is no wonder that they might feel alienated or resistant. Resistance sometimes took a playful, if slightly sarcastic, form in students' writing. For example, in her letter to the want ads, Claudia asked for a fictitious job "flipping burgers," citing her 5 years of real-life experience working as a waitress, cashier, and hostess at restaurants.

Enforcing foreignness and polarization of cultural identity

Prominent among the composition topics in these ESL classes were "your country" topics. They included variations such as "My country – a great place to visit," "Holidays in my country," "Problems of students in my country," and "A food served on special occasions in my culture." They included compare/contrast variations as well, such as "The way children are raised in the United States and your country," "Shopping in the United States and your country," "Attitudes toward the elderly in the United

States and your culture,” and “Attitudes toward wealth in the United States and your culture.” These topics have long been a staple of ESL writing instruction, and I count myself in the legions of teachers who have used them. Why are they so ubiquitous? For one thing, they (presumably) build on personal experience, and it is a long-held tenet of writing instruction that it is best to begin with what students know (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Elbow, 1973; Raimes, 1991; Spack, 1985). Students found this a sound notion. Penny observed, “Maybe it’s easier to write if you see it happens, you know? Like you know more ideas, you find more things.” These topics, then, are viewed as building a bridge between personal experience and academic, expository writing. They also accommodate students’ desire to talk about their home cultures, and lend themselves quite naturally to comparing and contrasting.

In many cases, however, the “your country” topics did not build on the personal experience of long-term residents, who had left “their country” as children. Rather, it forced them to speak hypothetically about issues either that they had not experienced as children in their natal culture or that had changed greatly since their departure. Perhaps the best example occurred in Penny’s ESL writing class, where, at their own request, students did reports on “their country.” While Penny is Vietnamese, she is also ethnic Chinese and speaks Cantonese at home. The teacher encouraged students to collaborate on their projects, and Penny chose to work with someone who spoke her home language, who happened to be from Hong Kong. As a result, Penny’s “your country” report was about China, a country she has never seen and can only remotely claim as her own. She thus completely circumvented the intent of the report topic, which was to elicit personal experience in service of writing instruction. In another instance, Penny’s teacher asked students to write about the “Return Home.” Because most of Penny’s relatives preceded her to the United States and she has only distant cousins left in Vietnam, her report naturally took on a rather speculative tone, again completely missing the intent of making use of personal experience. So far removed were some of these nominally personal experience topics from Penny’s experience, that she admitted “Sometime I make it up!”

Aeyfer told a poignant story of a woman in her class – Stephanie – who had immigrated to the United States very early in life and had only distant experience with her natal country or culture. When the teacher, Ms. Grayson, asked students to write about “their culture,”

Stephanie told her that she could not write about “her culture.” Accordingly, Grayson directed her to write about some other culture that Stephanie knew better. When Stephanie turned in a report on Germany, Aeyfer relates what happened: “So she [Grayson] picks up the paper, and she . . . goes, ‘This is not your work!’ She’s yelling like this. She [Stephanie] got red. . . . And then, she said, ‘I did that, Ms. Grayson.’ She [Grayson] said, ‘No, I don’t believe it. This

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is perfect. You could have not do it.' She goes, 'And why would you write about Germany unless, when you are Chinese?' She [Stephanie] goes like, 'Because you told me to write about other cultures maybe I know about.' And she [Grayson] goes like this, 'No! . . . It's *odd* for you to write about Germany!'"

Aeyfer reported that the issue was resolved only when Stephanie showed Grayson her notes and sources. In this case, then, a student was made to feel that there was something "odd" about her because she could not conjure up "her" country.

The issue of how "your culture" topics represent cultural difference and students' relationship to American culture has implications that go well beyond long-term residents' particular situation, however. In ESL classrooms, "*your country*" and "*your culture*" are frequently utilized as a shorthand, as a means to signify students' country of birth or origin and their home culture. That usage may seem sensible and innocuous enough when dealing with newly arrived students or those who will only be in the United States for a short time. Johnson (1994) has argued, however, that pronominal usage also serves as a powerful, if implicit, means of indexing inclusion and exclusion. Likewise, critical discourse analysts have argued that readers' and writers' social identities are implicitly conveyed and constructed through discourse (Ivanic, 1994). If we believe that learners forge "a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" through their interactions – spoken and written – with native speakers (Pierce, 1995), then we must recognize the latent potential of such prompts to signify a dichotomous, polarized view of the relationship between American culture and students' culture. This view can hold students at arm's length and foster a sense of alienation. Tucker (1995), discussing the work of Edward Said (1978), has cautioned that examining cultural and linguistic differences has the potential to set them in "contrived and misleading opposition." This potential is most evident in compare/contrast topics such as "Compare the way that children are raised *in the United States* and *your culture*." When instructors dichotomize culture, they may implicitly suggest that they view American cultural perspectives and students' cultural perspectives as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, because of teachers' dominant role in the classroom, that implicit view is not likely to be challenged. Rather, it is likely to be reproduced in the writing of students, who come to believe that teachers expect them to emphasize the foreign, the different. Consider, for example, Claudia's introductory essay to her writing teacher. Claudia writes:

Hello! My name is Claudia. I come from Viet Nam. I was born in August 10, 1975. I came to the United States of America in 1983 of November.

When I leave Viet Nam I was eight years old. I came to the United State with my mom, sister, grandma, and I.

I have a sister and a brother, my brother is ten years old and my sister is

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Excerpt

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twenty-three years old. My sister name Trinh she also go to Lakeland Community College.

I like the United State is because here I can get good education. In Viet Nam you can't go to school if your family doesn't have money.

My goal is to complete my Education on Dental Hygiene, and find a good job in order to take care of my mom, and grand parents in Viet Nam.

Notice that perhaps half of this essay is devoted to issues relating to Claudia's "foreignness" – where she was born, when and how she came to the United States. This essay would not be unusual, perhaps, for someone who has only recently arrived in the United States. However, after spending more than half of her life in the United States, one expects Claudia's cultural identity as a Vietnamese-American to be important to her, but probably not the only way that she identifies herself. Missing from this account, for example, is any mention of the fact that she graduated from a local high school, that she works part-time at a nearby restaurant, that she is taking other classes at Lakeland Community College, and that she likes to read novels in her spare time. One also suspects that Claudia could give a much more sophisticated critique of life as an American than a simplistic statement comparing education in the United States and Vietnam. Nevertheless, from her essay it is apparent that Claudia believes that her teacher expects to see a one-dimensional cultural novice or perpetual foreigner stance. The classroom dynamics and representations of culture that give impetus to such a stance are reinforced in the broader sociocultural context, where Greene (1993) has remarked on the tendency to think of newcomers in terms of their foreignness rather than other, more individualistic traits. She points out "the invisibility that has been imposed upon those thought of as 'other,' those perceived as alien in the familiar world," and comments that, "we do not and somehow cannot do justice to them in their particularity and distinctiveness."

"Your country" topics also hold the potential to play into stereotypes of Asian-Americans in American society, becoming classroom manifestations of those types. Scholars (Lee, 1992; Takaki, 1989; Wong, 1987) have asserted that Asians in the United States have historically been portrayed as unassimilable to American ways of life. Lee argues that the portrayal of Asian-Americans as inscrutable, as "dangerously foreign with no alliance or identification with America," has given way to the equally sterile rendering of a "model minority" of "quiet, well-behaved, hard workers" who are nonetheless still seen as perpetual foreigners. Third- and fourth-generation Asian-Americans tell stories of being asked, "Where [i.e., what *other* country] are you from?" Similarly, Aeyfer encountered stereotypes depicting Muslims as unenlightened fanatics who oppress women and are prone to violence. In her reading class one day, for example, she encountered a newspaper editorial titled "PBS Program Maligned the Muslim Community." Mura (1992) notes that long after it has

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become unacceptable in American popular culture to use derogatory and simplistic stereotypes of African-Americans, stereotypes of Asian-Americans (and, one might add, Islamic people as well) disappear more slowly. He believes that this creates a “problematic relationship to America and the English language.” In light of stereotypes held in the larger society, interpretations of composition topics about “your country” in the classroom can easily, if unintentionally, serve the polarizing function of telling students that they are different and that they must keep their distance from American culture.

The duality engendered by such topics produces a sort of cultural schizophrenia in long-term resident students’ writing. For example, Penny, in responding to the prompt “Are blue jeans popular in your culture?” writes: “Blue jeans are very popular in *my own culture* and around the world. *They* wear it like *we* it in the United States” (emphasis added). In the first sentence, *my own culture* refers to Vietnamese culture, in which Penny includes herself. In the second sentence, though, *they* means the Vietnamese, not Penny, and in the same sentence she includes herself in *we*, meaning Americans. Despite the fact that she recently became a U.S. citizen, Penny is so accustomed to hearing references to Vietnam as “her country,” that it does not particularly bother her. Note the following exchange I had with her:

L: When she [the teacher] says like, *your* country, do you feel like Vietnam is your country, or is the United States your country, or are they both your countries?

P: I feel Vietnam.

L: Really?

P: Yah, 'cause I get used to it, you know! (*laughs*)

L: You get used to what? (*laughs*)

P: Like, saying, “Our own country,” you know? (*laughs*)

While Penny laughs about this, I find it troubling. Penny will build her future in the United States, and yet she has evidently been made to feel that “her own country” does not include the United States, but rather is limited to a distant place that she has not seen in years.

It must be acknowledged that the exact circumstances under which learners come into American society, as well as their future relationship with English and American culture, affect where students place themselves in terms of culture, and whether they see any implicit conflicts with such a duality. For example, international students who plan to study in the United States and then return to their country of origin may not be particularly troubled by the dichotomizing of home and U.S. cultures. No matter what students’ background, however, many believe that one cannot truly learn how to write in a language without taking on the perceptions and viewpoints of cultural participants. Shen (1989), for example, has argued that learning how to write in English entails a redefinition of

the values acquired from one's social and cultural background. In order to write well in English, Shen maintains that one must develop an "English identity," a sort of second "skin" for perceiving the world. Likewise, Fox (1994) argues that learning how to write in another language produces profound changes in those who live and work in other countries. She believes this is because "writing is so tied to thinking – the inner expression of a person's being – and to communicative style – its outer expression – thus touching the core of the writer's identity" (p. 71).

When students feel they are being pressed to conform to American linguistic and cultural norms and perhaps even to transform their ways of thinking through writing instruction, but at the same time feel that they are receiving a conflicting message to keep their distance, resistance is likely to ensue. For example, in an essay on the topic "Shopping in your country and the United States," Penny shows her resistance to the tendency of "your country" essay topics to emphasize difference and distance between cultures over the universal, what Geertz (1983, p. 14) has observed as the tendency for outsiders to focus on the exotic and to minimize the normality of the culture. After a dutiful cataloging of the differences between Vietnamese and American shopping as she vaguely recalled them, she adds a final parting shot, writing, "The way they do it [shop] is the same, because they need money to pay for it in both countries"; and, just in case her teacher takes her seriously, she adds, "This is just a joke."

Conflicting classroom agendas

For the informants in this study, as well as for many of their American-born peers, enrolling in college served as the catalyst for thinking about and grappling with identity. Students' struggles with these issues took outward signs – Aeyfer and Penny changed their hairstyle, and Penny and Hanh made significant changes in how they dressed, for example. Students' evolving views of their identities manifested themselves in other ways as well. Upon becoming citizens, Claudia (formerly Ngan) and Penny (formerly Tuyet) changed their names in a sort of metaphoric rebirth, literally looking through baby name books for new identities. Aeyfer reported frequent arguments with her parents about her major and her future, toying with the unlikely possibility of leaving her entire family to return alone to Turkey. Although the nature of the struggles might have been different, it is likely that newcomer students in these students' classes were working through cultural identity issues as well. Like long-term residents, they too face the continuing task of functioning in American culture, and placing themselves on various continua of cultural values and beliefs. Students' writing classes, with their emphasis on eliciting student

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opinions and beliefs through journals and class discussion, ostensibly provided ideal environments to explore culture and to tap those explorations in order to develop L2 writing skills. Nevertheless, students' attempts to engage these issues in L2 writing classes sometimes seemed at odds with other agendas in the classroom and were thus rebuffed, setting off resistance.

The most striking example of such a conflict in agendas took place in Hanh's writing class. Of the four students in this study, the exploration of cultural identity appeared most intense for Hanh, whose life had changed the most in college. She was separated from all of her high-school friends, living in a dormitory and immersed in campus life. She was associating with a number of Asian-American acquaintances dealing with similar identity issues. Her deliberations on culture and identity frequently found a place in her ESL writing class compositions and journal entries. In one essay, for example, she wrote that she thought that there should be a foreign language section in the school newspaper so that "Students who lost their nationality can learn more about their roots." In another composition, she wrote:

I have been in America for almost six years. I'm still not used to American's lifestyle. I still need to learn more and have more experience about it. I have live in my country for twelve years, but I still needed to learn a lot of things. I left my country when I was young therefore I don't know much about my culture and my language.

Clearly, Hanh's need to locate herself culturally was a powerful motivating force for her writing. Hanh's teacher seemed to be caught unawares by this need of his students. Intent on his charge from the English department to address expository writing, he considered Hanh's essays on this subject to be inappropriate. He complained that she was writing very "romantic" essays talking about cultural identity and feeling stranded between cultures, which he characterized as expressive writing that did not meet course goals. Over the course of the semester, Hanh and other students grew increasingly unresponsive in class, and the teacher noted that they did their work halfheartedly and did not seem invested in the course – if he was rejecting their agenda, they were rejecting his as well. In this case, then, the instructor's understandable impulse to hold to his objectives acted only to intensify student resistance, and at the same time rendered him unable to utilize students' consideration of cultural identities as a means of motivating writing development.

Aeyfer's religion was an important part of her identity. In interviews, she often prefaced statements with "In my religion, we. . . ." When she registered for courses, she told me that she looked for instructors' names that might indicate Islamic origins. It is not surprising that she felt somewhat of a personal investment in an assigned reading for her writing class

titled “The Arab World.” When the teacher opened up class discussion on the article, Aeyfer immediately asserted that she already knew a lot about the article because she came from a similar culture. Her comment set the class off on a discussion of religion. The teacher seemed uncomfortable with the direction the discussion was taking. She attempted to steer the discussion into a more relativistic discussion of religion, directing turns to Christians and the Buddhists in the room. Aeyfer, with rising frustration, persistently bid for turns. Moreover, despite the teacher’s best efforts to redirect the discussion, other students in the class kept returning to Aeyfer with questions. The discussion culminated in a pointed exchange in which the teacher asked Aeyfer if religion is the same as culture, and Aeyfer responded, “I thought religion was part of culture.” Watching this exchange, I understood the teacher’s inclination to tread carefully in the potentially explosive topic of religion as well as her concern to distribute turns equally among her students. At the same time, however, Aeyfer’s exasperation with the discussion was palpable. I could imagine her growing sense that an important part of her cultural background and identity was being disregarded in class. Later, Aeyfer and her teacher both told me that they had engaged in several similar exchanges over the course of the semester. Again, one can see the miscues between teacher and student intent and goals, and the missed opportunities to channel the intellectual and emotional energy that students have invested in cultural identity issues into English writing instruction. Rather, these encounters intensified resistance.

“Mainstream” and “travelogue” depictions of culture

Another way in which representation of culture in these classrooms potentially generated resistance was through the tendency to depict culture as “mainstream ways of thinking held by mainstream citizens of well-defined nation-states” (Kramsch, 1993a). Such a view tends toward reductionist and unidimensional images of culture, and fosters a “travelogue” depiction of cross-cultural experiences in which culture is portrayed as picturesque, a “sightseeing curiosity” (Kramsch, 1993a; Mar-Molinero, 1992). These views of culture and cross-cultural encounters were well represented in students’ course work, in which they were asked to read several actual travelogues – for example, a sentence-combining exercise about an exotic beach vacation locale, and a reading passage about a Japanese tourist in New York. Not only did writing prompts such as “My country: A great place to visit” explicitly invite a travelogue portrayal of students’ first culture, but students also construed other “your country” topics as asking for a travelogue as well. Hanh, for example, concluded her composition on the topic “Food served on a special occasion in your

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country” with the travelogue coda, “I hope you have enjoyed learning [about] the moon Festival.” Resistance to the travelogue view of culture was demonstrated by several students in Claudia’s writing class, who spent the class break creating a raucous parody of a “My country – a great place to visit” composition that highlighted tourist attractions such as prostitutes.

Hanh’s textbook for writing class also evidenced a travelogue ethos. Her text, intended for a college ESL audience, was organized around recurring characters, a band of international and American-born college students safely ensconced in a university campus, who strike up earnest conversations about how hard they are all studying and whose worst problem seems to be the cafeteria food. The reductionism implicit in the unidimensional, “travelogue” depiction of culture in such texts and writing prompts did not invite students to probe the complexities or potential contentiousness of cross-cultural communication. Such depictions of culture, which are not uncommon in textbooks aimed at a college ESL audience, are perhaps most consonant with the experiences of “privileged” students (Vandrick, 1995). For some international students, for example, who bring with them the certainty that they will eventually return home to a secure place in the social hierarchy, the dilemmas of culture shock and intercultural communication may be uncomfortable, but they are nevertheless transient. These individuals may choose whether to address or to retreat from the questions raised by cross-cultural encounters about self-identification, power relationships among ethnic or linguistic groups, and potential cultural change. For students such as Hanh, however, who had confronted these questions daily in an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse high school, the text was rather incongruous. The construal of culture as “mainstream” fosters a static rather than dynamic view of multiculturalism – a live-and-let-live relativism in which cultural mixing is always a cordial exchange among equals, where cultural boundaries remain intact and immobile, and where contact among individuals from various cultures does not imply any influence, transformation, or re-creation of their respective cultures. These travelogues suggest that there is nothing more to crossing cultural boundaries than knowing what to pack, how to dress, what to see, and what to eat.

In opposition to the travelogue representation of culture, scholars influenced by sociocultural thought and postmodernism have stressed the multiplicity of culture and cultural identity, and the impossibility of fixing them or reducing them to stereotypes. Lum (1992), for example, notes that because a group such as Chinese-Americans is extremely heterogeneous in terms of class, education, sex, generation, and point of origin, answers to questions about “your culture” can only be answered from within each individual’s own place in the constellation of variables that make up culture. Similarly, Penny, Claudia, and Hanh saw their orientations as very

different. They noted differences among themselves and among other Vietnamese-American classmates in characteristics such as literacy and educational level in L1, socioeconomic status, attitudes toward schooling, and family networks in the United States and Vietnam. When a “your country” question in one class resulted in different answers from Vietnamese-American students in Penny’s class, however, the teacher wrote on her paper, “Other people from Vietnam disagreed. You’ll have to talk to one another!” Given the recurrent patterns of cultural essentializing in these students’ classrooms, the comment holds at least an implication that people from “their culture” necessarily share uniform perceptions and attitudes, and that the Vietnamese students in Penny’s class need to get their stories straight. The mainstream view of culture and the travelogue view of cross-cultural encounters potentially hinder L2 writers from drawing on the polyphonous voices of both the native and the target culture (Bakhtin, 1981; Kachru, 1995b; Rodby, 1992) to which they have access.

In sum, then, while explanation and discussion of culture were not an explicit instructional goal in these ESL writing classrooms, they were nonetheless a substantial, and perhaps inevitable, part of the curriculum. When representations of culture in these classrooms took predefined or assumed form, they potentially engendered resistance. In some instances, the version of culture forwarded by the instructor or the curriculum did not match students’ needs and experience. In other cases, it did not allow for multiple or non-“mainstream” views of culture, or for a dynamic and contentious view of cultural mixing. At times representations, perhaps reflecting dominant sociocultural norms, implicitly dichotomized cultures and alienated students who were already a part of American culture. Finally, students’ countering representations of culture sometimes were tacitly rejected.

One might conclude from this discussion that language minority students who have been schooled in American public schools simply do not belong in ESL classes at the college level. It might be argued that whatever academic and linguistic needs students bring with them from American high schools are best addressed in mainstream freshman composition and developmental writing courses, where they will be among students with the same previous academic training and experience. This has indeed been the route taken at a number of American universities. On the other hand, as conscientious advocates of language minority students at their respective institutions, instructors at Lakeland Community College and State University felt that they needed to protect students from mainstream courses that would not serve them as well as ESL. They pointed out that few of the mainstream instructors at their institutions possessed the training and expertise necessary to sort out students’ academic writing ability from their language-specific instructional needs, or to respond appropriately to those needs. They believed that students’ most intractable

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and fossilized nonstandard language features were the product of previous instruction in mainstream classrooms. They worried that students would be unfairly penalized by mainstream composition instructors confounding English-language proficiency with writing or general academic ability. In view of the paucity of research evidence about language minority students' experiences with reading and writing in mainstream college classrooms in the years after they leave ESL or freshman composition, these teachers' fears must be given serious consideration. In any case, long-term resident students at these two institutions, as at many other institutions in the United States, were likely to continue to be directed into ESL-specific writing instruction.

We are left, then, with the question of how ESL instructors might best simultaneously address the needs of both the newcomers and the long-term residents in their classes. A number of approaches for the instruction of linguistically and ethnically diverse students have been offered in which students' inevitable efforts to define their multiple cultural affiliations become a means of motivating writing development in the target language.

Cultural inquiry through L2 writing

In her writings on learner motivation, Pierce (1995) stresses the significance of incorporating "the lived experiences and social identities of language learners" into the curriculum. Advocating a Freirian "problem-posing" approach to language education, Pierce emphasizes that we cannot assume what those experiences and identities are. Rather, she promotes exploration of culture and social identity by students as the means through which language and writing skills are developed. Other writing instructors from diverse perspectives suggest similar approaches. Rodby (1992), for example, proposes countering what she sees as the enforced "outsiderness" of ESL literacy students with the formation of a classroom community or "communitas" (Turner, 1974) where students can collaborate as a group to explore their multiple cultural affiliations, and become aware of how these affiliations are mediated by written language. Similarly, Pratt (1991) and Lu (1994) advocate the creation of a classroom "contact zone," an arena in which "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1991). Lu (1994) asks students to give conscious consideration to "the context of their personal life, history, culture, and society" in the choices they make as a writer. Other formulations are described by Pathy-Chavez and Gergen (1992), who apply a "problem-posing" approach to college ESL writing instruction, and Tucker (1995), who describes the implementation of an American Studies course for ESL students.

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These approaches share a deliberate avoidance of received representations of culture in the curriculum. Starting from the premise that culture is not self-evident, they ask students to take an active participatory role in defining culture in the classroom and, while acknowledging teachers' continuing leadership and power, describe a more facilitative and less directive role. These accounts suggest that the function of cultural content in ESL writing classrooms can be to problematize culture, and to facilitate students' explorations and evolving understandings of culture from their own varied individual backgrounds and experiences as a productive means of developing second language writing proficiency.

We have seen how some of the cultural assumptions and depictions of culture conveyed to students in the college ESL writing classrooms in this study potentially fostered alienation and resistance among students. This was by no means the only way that culture was dealt with in these classrooms, however. In fact, a good share of the ESL curriculum at both Lakeland Community College and State University held the potential to engage students in a process of cultural exploration and construction, utilizing instructional practices that built on student perspectives and thoughts about culture as a creative force for second language writing.

One topic area that was conducive to this approach addressed U.S. attitudes toward racial and ethnic diversity, immigration, and "multiculturalism." Aeyfer, for example, was asked to read and respond to two very different editorial views on immigration. One, by University of California chancellor Chang-Lin Tien, discussed immigrant bashing and scapegoating, while a contrasting editorial was titled "Lest We Become the Tired, Poor." Aeyfer was also asked to read and respond to a newspaper article discussing whether speaking a different language at home impedes the school performance of children. Students in Lakeland Community College reading classes were assigned an article that discussed the place of immigrants among U.S. small-business owners. Similarly, in Hanh's class at State University, students were asked to write an essay addressing the subject of racism. Assignments such as these facilitate an awareness in students that culture in the United States is diverse and multivocal. They counter what Wong (1992) has described as "the potency and persistence of existing hegemonic discourses on American ethnic groups, which pit each minority against a quasi-monolithic 'mainstream,' ignoring the realities of an already multi-ethnic America."

Another area of inquiry in the ESL writing classes in this study that seemed to lend itself naturally to problematizing culture pertained to American values and their manifestations in current events and students' own experiences. Topics in this area held the potential for students to link their own personal experience to larger sociocultural issues. For example, Aeyfer engaged in a dialogue journal by E-mail with her teacher regarding an encounter she had on the bus with a Christian who was extolling the virtues of his religion at the expense of others. Such an experience can

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serve as rich material for the further exploration of various manifestations of religious values in American society. Topics pertaining to American cultural values and perceptions were particularly conducive to engaging students in dialogue or debate. For example, students in ESL reading classes at Lakeland Community College discussed an article titled “America’s Best-Kept Secret: Things Are Going Pretty Well,” which addressed whether continuing pessimism in the American public was justified in light of many improving social conditions. Claudia and Penny read and responded to an article on the dangers of realistic-looking toy guns, and were invited to give their opinions on the broader issue of gun control legislation. These topics invited students to address issues that all participants in U.S. culture face, and to weigh in with their own opinions and ideas. Confirming the value of exploring these themes, all of the study informants concurred that discussing and writing personal opinions regarding elements of American culture were their most useful and interesting writing assignments.

Finally, although, as we have seen, received representations of culture in the ESL writing curriculum may result in reductionist or alienating renderings of students’ native cultures, that is not to say that discussion of culture must be suspended, but only that such discussions must be motivated by and have their origin in students’ perceptions and needs. There are compelling reasons to address students’ natal cultures and issues of cross-cultural adjustment, anomie, and cultural identities. Wong (1992), for example, asserts that newcomers to American society try to reconstruct and recover their past life in their natal culture – “the lost center” of the past – as a means of equipping themselves to change culturally and develop a new reference point, or “center” in the United States. Thus, discussions of students’ native cultures can serve as a powerful generative force, facilitating students’ evolving understanding of their multiple cultural identities even while they are developing L2 writing skills. Nevertheless, just as a comparative stance holds an implicit risk of conveying a self-evident and static view of culture, discussions of cross-cultural adjustment may implicitly elicit, or even explicitly mandate, expressions of immigrant angst, nostalgia, and anomie. A good example of this genre was produced by Claudia, who had just spent her first summer in 10 years in Vietnam with her extended family. She wrote in her journal:

“My Dream”

I had a wonderful dream last night. my dream was that, I went back to my native country, an there I saw my grand parents, aunt, uncle, and cousin. they treated me very good. Then when I got into the dreaming loving them and hugging them suddenly I wake up. It seem like they to far from me wich make me can’t hug them.

The very real and powerful emotions that generate such expressions of nostalgia, sadness, and confusion must be acknowledged. Students may need to capture and explore these feelings in writing, and ESL writing

class is a logical place for them to do so. In fact, the need for expression is sometimes so great that students will produce such sentiments even if they conflict with the instructional agenda. Hanh's teacher complained that students were producing these sorts of reflections in spite of his lack of enthusiasm for them: "She's one of the students who keeps expressing . . . the nostalgia for Vietnam, being without a country, and not fitting into the United States." On other occasions, however, assignments and essay prompts may explicitly demand such displays of anomie. For example, Claudia was assigned essay topics such as "I miss my hometown," "Leaving my country," and "Coming to the United States." Such topics hold the potential for "recentering" or coming to terms with the past as a means to shape a future cultural identity, but they also hold the real possibility that students will produce a display of immigrant angst merely for the benefit of the teacher. In fact, at the same time that Hanh was writing some reflections that her teacher felt were too personal in nature, she was also expressing some resentment of assignments that she felt asked her to make a public display of private thoughts. Hanh commented, "Sometime it's like, it's too personal, and you don't want to write about it." Aeyfer complained that her teacher was pressuring students to publish essays containing information that Aeyfer considered private in the department's semiannual magazine of student writing. There is a potential danger in such essays becoming coercive (i.e., students find that they need to make such displays of private thoughts and angst in order to secure the teacher's sympathy and goodwill) or becoming a means for students to resist and to mitigate the power relations between the teacher and themselves (i.e., students produce them because they realize that it makes it difficult for teachers to address other aspects of their writing for fear of appearing insensitive). In either case, writing produced is not genuinely motivated by students.

Despite this risk, most ESL writing teachers would agree that, treated with sensitivity and caution, explorations of students' natal cultures, cross-cultural adjustment, anomie, and identity can serve as powerful generative issues in the classroom. Classroom tasks must somehow ensure, then, that students are not coerced into making displays of emotion or private thoughts, while at the same time ensuring that the validity of such displays is acknowledged as legitimate when proffered. The assignments in this study that seemed to do this best involved experiences of others who have crossed cultural boundaries. In one assignment, for example, Penny read and responded to vignettes ostensibly written by two second language learners, each posing a dilemma faced in crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries. In another assignment, Penny read and responded to a short story about a Native American man returning home to the reservation for the first time in years. Both assignments allowed Penny the option of directing her analysis outward and commenting on the protagonists'

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experiences and feelings about cultural adjustment in the third person, as well as the option of responding in the first person and relating their experiences and feelings explicitly to her own cross-cultural adjustment process.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have utilized the perceptions of ESL students who are long-term residents as a unique vantage point from which to critique how culture is dealt with in ESL writing classrooms. The presence of these students in ESL college composition raises many larger questions, to be sure. There is the fundamental question, for example, of when enough is enough. When should students be regarded as second language learners whose written language features indicate a developing command of the English language. When should they be considered proficient and functional bilinguals whose writing may nevertheless exhibit fossilized or contact variety features – features that arguably should be expected and tolerated in a diverse, multilingual society? Valdes (1992) has argued that the current compartmentalization of ESL and mainstream composition stems from the false belief that ESL composition instruction will transform students into writers who are virtually indistinguishable from mainstream monolingual writers. She argues that this belief penalizes bilingual language minority students whose language skills may be fully functional in college communicative contexts, and yet whose English production may never precisely match a mainstream monolingual's language use. In terms of this study, we might ask if Claudia is still best served by ESL. After a decade of U.S. education, it is likely that further ESL instruction will have diminishing returns, and yet it is also quite possible that mainstream instructors would penalize Claudia for the nonnative-like features still evident in her academic writing. Valdes argues that the presence of bilingual language minority students in college writing courses calls for a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between ESL and mainstream composition instruction, and more responsibility on the part of mainstream instructors for bilingual student writing development. While such issues are beyond the scope of this chapter, findings from this study indicate that they deserve wider attention.

This chapter illustrates how teachers' views of ourselves, our students, and the relationship among cultures are represented not only through explicit instruction regarding cultural differences in rhetorical and aesthetic values for texts, but also implicitly in the course content, assignments, and class discussions in which we engage with students. In order to counter implicit assumptions about culture and resulting student resistance, areas of cultural inquiry were identified in these same classrooms

that facilitated a multifaceted representation of culture and that potentially invited students to define culture for themselves. By proposing such an approach to instruction, I do not mean to imply that ESL writers in our classes will or should come away with any conclusive determinations about culture or cultural identity. On the contrary, because constructions of culture are multiple and shifting, such determinations will remain elusive. The point, then, is not to find a final resolution to inquiries regarding culture, but rather to engage in the process itself of questioning representations of culture. Grappling with cultural issues maybe a useful and potentially transformative experience not only for long-term resident language minority students, anyone who crosses cultural boundaries, including the teachers who utilize these approaches.

Instructional practices that problematize culture and engage students in its definition do not preclude explicit training and modeling of American academic cultural norms for written prose, nor do they preclude the representation of mainstream types of culture and cultural values in the classroom. These norms and types are part of the sociocultural and political context in which instructional practices are embedded, and their pervasive influence must be acknowledged and dealt with. After all, to explore these issues without an explicit instrumental goal of developing students' ability to function in L2 academic contexts is to invite further student resistance. We must be very clear, however, with our students and with ourselves, about the nature of what we are presenting in the classroom, and its sociocultural and political origin. As Tucker (1995) notes, it is "an unavoidably political enterprise to engage, to read, to 'write' other cultures. For that matter, ESL teachers soon discover, it is equally an ideologically charged endeavor to teach one's culture to others." In dealing with culture in ESL writing instruction, we have the potential to take students' individual explorations with cultural adaptation and to transform it into collective work of meaning and identity. Even while acknowledging that the broader societal context shapes how and what of we represent culture in the classroom, we must also believe that classrooms can be a space from which we creatively construct, contest, and redefine culture.