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Suan Sunandha Academic & Research Review

Procedural Knowledge Development in the Thai University Classroom

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Abstract

John Wilson argues that traditional learning procedures are insufficient to equip university students for their careers as academic writers. He advocates classroom activities that reflect developments in the history of intellectual thought and encourage the learner to development dialectical learning strategies that will be reflected later in their written work.

Western university teachers working in Thailand notice that their students have very good memories but lack facility for discursive reasoning. When asked for a personal opinion about some topic, many such learners are at a loss to respond. Why?

One answer is not altogether surprising. Traditional teaching methods do not require learners to give opinion; they require them to absorb and repeat information. Moreover, in Thai culture, social distance between teacher and learner is more formalized than in the west: power relations require that the learner adopt a deferential attitude, the emphasis is on passive learning strategies with controlled, diminished interaction.

It is an efficient system in terms of the transmission of a fixed canon. Quantities of unalterable facts can be readily assimilated in this way. However, these procedures do not adapt well to topics that are mutable, contradistinctive or arise in an unfinished evolutionary state. Neither do they stimulate the learner's powers of discrimination or covert reasoning skills.

Here we can see that cultural norms do much to foster a cognitive style. From an early age, the Thai learner is encouraged to develop field dependent learning strategies seeing confidence in a mentor/transmitter as preferable to latitudinal strategies which encourage "nonpartisan" judgments within internal frames of reference. The emphasis is on declarative knowledge, "knowing that", rather than procedural knowledge, "knowing how". Procedural knowledge consists of the strategies and procedures employed by a learner to process a body of knowledge for later exposition. This involves a lot more than field dependent memorizing (cf. Ellis 1986:115, 164-167)

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Western educated academics sometimes assume other cultures have the same approach to assimilating ideas in education. They do not. Dialectical methods, as a form of procedural knowledge acquisition, which westerners take for granted, filtered through to western culture from the Ancient Greeks more than a thousand years ago. Over the centuries, these interactive approaches shaped western thought. University education reflected these methods by encouraging rhetoric and competition between contrary viewpoints. Meanwhile, other cultures preferred homogeneity through assimilating established declarative knowledge: monologue, memorization, reliance on an established canon of knowledge; deference to specialists who embodied centuries of tradition in their expertise.

The results of the latter as a teaching method are plainly evident. Thai students are cooperative. They have very good memories. They are deferential in their contributions and are highly dependent on the teacher as mentor and guide.

This is a useful learning strategy in terms of assimilating information, but it does not provide for intuiting the lateral propositions that support it; it does not stimulate talents to access the reasoning chains that preceded a given theoretical position; it 'does not encourage the perspicacity required for spotting subsequent implications. Memorisation and deference are static: they do not provide, on their own, the impetus for accessing more complex topic related knowledge frames outside the transmitted text.

Traditional learning styles do not equip the university student writer for participation in a genre which requires justification for adopting an argument proposed in their written discourse.

In universities, L2 student writers from non-western cultures face a twofold problem. Not only do they have to grapple with the lexico-grammatical complexities of the target language, but also, in order to satisfy the demands of an international academic writing genre, they must move into appropriate reasoning styles and adapt to new expository systems in rhetorical organization. But what does appropriate reasoning style consist of? Isn't the way they already reason good enough? The answer is: not within the conventions of an international academic arena. Their approach to describing and solving academic problems is, as we have noted, related to repeating information. This will not be enough to induce the dialectical reasoning styles characteristic of western academic thought.

H G Widdowson (1984) has pointed out that reader-friendly texts contain a hidden dialogue when the reader's reactions are catered for by the perspicacious writer who anticipates the thoughts of a discerning reader. These features are discernible when we encounter responses to anticipated objections; questions raised with answers provided; or amplification



through convincing examples, to name a few. Moreover, an academic text will often encapsulate historical developments in a discourse, schematically prior to the argument at hand, and familiarise the reader with current exchanges within that speech community.

Writers from backgrounds where traditional learning has been the norm will not be psychologically prepared for introducing these features into their own writing. Their experience has been that one does not challenge received opinion and, therefore, objections, or protracted negotiation, should not arise for consideration. Where knowledge has been presented as precocious behavior verging on impertinence.

With MA students in the Linguistics Department at SWU we have been trying out a procedural knowledge development programme which fosters critical thinking. Within a purposefully created egalitarian atmosphere, more than half of my writing periods are given to the presentation and discussion of ideas. Students are being encouraged to initiate interaction by taking over the control of sections of discourse through bids which deliberately seek to antagonise the stability of

a given exposition. This includes finding and expressing doubts and objections about an argument, sifting for possible weaknesses, offering rival interpretations where they may occur.

In the MA course Communicative Reading and Writing skills students are requested to experiment with expository speech acts during each session. Recursively, the students are asked to express wondering, doubts, objections, hypotheses; assertions, defences and summaries.

Where possible, I renounce my teacher's role as the sole repository of a subject field and attempt a more Socratic position. I queried the learners about their assertions, being just as critical of positions that supported my own instruction as with contrary views. Learners were constantly challenged to justify their views in whatever form they arose .. This was accompanied by distributing a list of the above mentioned expository speech acts that were required for active use. Students were free to decide when they were to attempt a given speech act as long as they tried it at some time during the session.

These procedural innovations accompanied the more formal instruction regarding western genre conventions in academic writing.

After ten weeks, the students were asked to write brief responses to four questions about their course.



1. What was your first reaction to being asked for your own opinion?

The invitation make voluntary contributions without elaborate prior instruction initially mel with silence and hesitancy. The learners felt ill-at-ease with this imposition and used avoidance strategies in class. Written answers to the question included:

"I wanted to avoid it."

"I did not feel comfortable."

"I was confused and unsure."

These reactions showed a marked disinclination to embark on moves foreign to the previous classroom experiences. As expected, sentiment was against volunteering persons viewpoints.

Teachers in western universities appreciate that the role of systematic doubt and critlism contributes to our eventual confidence in the veracity of accepted theories. Since Descartes this has been one of the chief instruments for testing the reliability of propositions in the sciences However, as we have noted, expressing contrary views in Thai classrooms is socially problematic: it can be viewed as impolite or inviting trouble. Risking an contrary view emanates the speaker from an apparent consensus of opinion: In a society which prizes the homogeneity of the group above the particularities of the individual, contrary views are socially destabilising. Thus, dissent is against the norms of traditional Thai classroom behavior which values the preservation of social cohesion and harmony above personal initiative. The second question provoked predictable difficulties.

2. What was your first reaction to being asked to express contrary views?

There was alarm about this,

"Panic! How was I going to do this?"

"I was frightened and worried"

"I didn't know whether my opinions would be accepted or not."

"I found it difficult to think of a reason to support my contrary viewpoint."

Only one student welcomed the idea,

"It's something I've longed for."

After an initial period of reluctance, the students made the pleasant discovery that dissent, far from being a destructive element that sabotages classroom progress, actually generates new discourse which serves to reinforce or clarify ideas. Other reactions include,

"I discussed with my friend and got more detail."

"It helps me with analytical thinking."



Following my request for the insertion of critical evaluation inside assignment essays, a lot of discussion ensued. Class discussions became more animated. There was an atmosphere of attentiveness and engagement. Unlike the grey similarity among ideas when they are memorized for repetition in a forthcoming exam, some notions became vivid, clearer and had a life of their own. This was reflected in other answers to question 2.

"I like to get different viewpoints. It helps me grow in ideas."

"I think it is useful to discuss about the contents because it makes the contents clearer to me." These procedures also had an effect on study habits,

"I realized that I lack this skill, but then I practice by myself during reading articles."

It is worth noting that such prewriting activities also served as a convenient parallel to the conventions of scientific debate: they help students to move away from memoriser/receiver mode into exploratory speculation, thereby revealing the developmental aspects of theory construction. This activity shows students how progress in the history of ideas can be tenuous and flawed. This was also reflected in answers to the next question.

3.1 In what ways have our discussions helped you to form your ideas about writing?

"It helps me to see my point clearly."

"It helps me to be clearer and firm."

"When my colleagues propose the ideas I normally think of the argument."

"It helps us to make sure if our ideas are possible."

The discussions also helped students to systematize their thinking.

"It helps you to group scattered ideas."

"It helps me to write in a systematic and balanced way."

Thus, these discussion groups were influential in the formation and organization of conceptual prototypes. They legitimized and ordered the student's grasp of an issue which, as frames for procedural knowledge, became the substance of exposition.

"I know the steps of writing, how to organize the ideas."

At the end of the course students were asked to compare discussion methods with more traditional forms of teaching.



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4. How would you compare our discussion methods with more traditional forms of learning?

All students agreed that discussion was volitional and enabled them to advance their own thought processes.

"Traditional learning is passive. Discussion makes ideas grow and be reasonable."

"We make our own decisions"

One student remarked,

"The traditional way is like a duplicating machine, but the discussion method is like seed planting: it grows."

Another student provided this article with its own conclusion,

" [in] Traditional forms of learning, learners are forced to believe what is taught. Our discussions provoked new ideas and helped us to think systematically, critically, and analytically."

Towards the end of the course there was a marked increase in confidence for voicing ideas and learners seemed much busier with their own writing activities as a result. Keywords and phrases had been assimilated into their repertoire through constant repetition in discussions around the room. There was a general enthusiasm for dialectical approaches to learning and a widespread sensation of personal accomplishment. Students displayed greater confidence at all levels of self expression and were not so nervous about beginning new written projects. As one student remarked.

"I know myself how to prepare the appropriate words."

The results of the above teaching techniques suggest that teachers in Thai universities (and schools) would do well to stimulate procedural knowledge acquisition by encouraging frequent critical learner exposition during a course of study. By paralleling the conventions of academic debate, such activity acts as a preparation for the more sober and reflective activity of composing essays.

This process oriented classroom activity, lacking the traditional autocratic controls of teacher input, frees the learner for field independent reflection. It cannot be overemphasized how volitional this activity is for meaningful learning. We have to understand what it is that non-western cultures have not integrated into their learning strategies and create interactive procedures that facilitate confidence and dynamic thinking. This will, as a by-product, introduce students to writing within the conventions of an international academic genre.



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A Reprint from Journal of Humanities. Vol.16 Nos. 1-2 (1994: 39-46)