The Role of Content Schemata in ESL Composition

by Cem Alptekin and Margaret Alptekin

In evaluating ESL compositions, teachers seem to pay a great deal of attention to the accuracy and appropriateness of linguistic and rhetorical properties, often at the expense of the discourse value of the students' writing that underlies the content of their texts. Possible reasons for this particular attention to form stem from the common practice of judging student compositions primarily in the light of textual criteria that can be easily reduced to linguistic rules and rhetorical models. Although linguistic and rhetorical properties are quite important in the evaluation of ESL compositions, they should not be considered so crucial that readers—in this instance the writing teachers— neglect the communicative essence of the text.

However, unlike the more or less clearly defined textual (linguistic and rhetorical) properties on which the teacher tends to base his opinion of the student's written product, there is no principled basis for assessing objectively the discourse value of a text written by an ESL student in the absence of commonly shared content schemata between a teacher and a student from different cultures. Content schemata, in the light of schema-theoretical conceptions of reading comprehension, are defined here as one's prior culture-based background knowledge of the content area of the text and his culturally determined prototypical structures of knowledge which, as Dechert indicates, are associated with his "experience of prior events and [which] organize the perception, memorization, and reconstruction of new events" (1983:176-177). It is assumed that the reader interacts with the text, and thus with the writer, by activating his own background knowledge and cognitive processes, thereby constructing meaning from it and eventually assimilating it as a whole.[1] In the case of a native English-speaking teacher of ESL, deciding how to interpret properly the propositional content and the illocutionary significance (Widdowson 1978) of compositions written by foreign students could become a serious problem and thus negatively affect his evaluation of the text, not necessarily because of linguistic and/or rhetorical difficulties impeding the message but also because of different background knowledge and cognitive processes operating between the parties.

Of course, the evaluation of the text may suffer not only in those instances where the mismatch between the content schemata of the writer and the reader causes the latter to misinterpret the former's ideas. As pointed out previously, it is quite possible for the teacher to shy away from evaluating the paper for its discoursal and textual properties by placing a myopic focus on its textual features alone. Aside from its drawbacks in evaluation, such a facile measurement of the student's writing may foster faulty learning habits. In fact, the student may become so preoccupied with the proper application of linguistic and rhetorical criteria to his composition that there will not be much spare capacity left in his mental resources for communication (Widdowson 1983: 47).

In order to prevent students from getting preoccupied with producing compositions merely for the sake of producing compositions in a given form, the teacher as the reader ought to make it clear to them that he is genuinely interested in what they have to say. Of course, interest alone is not enough to stimulate the students to write well. They also need to know that the teacher is an informed and critical reader not only in matters pertaining to language and rhetoric but also in terms of what constitutes their own consciousness embedded in their culturally determined world view. To be a cross-culturally informed and critical reader, the teacher needs to develop

an awareness of both his own content schemata and those of his students on a variety of topics or themes which are likely to be used in the course. For such an awareness to evolve, he needs to acquire information about his students' sociocultural traditions by consulting reliable sources in cross-cultural studies and other relevant fields. In addition, he might use his students as guides to building insights into their world views. Only then can he equip himself with his students' culture-based background knowledge and cognitive processes in order to set up an epistemological basis on which to construct accurate meaning from their compositions– to be sure, in their own experiential and conceptual terms. Otherwise, it would not be unlikely for him to misinterpret the student's intended message in the light of his own culturally determined content schemata. For example, an American teacher of ESL writing who is accustomed to thinking along the lines of what Scovel calls "the typically American worship of individualism" (1983:90) may assess a Chinese student's composition in the light of the individualistic norms and values of his conceptual universe and ask the student to change the nominative case of the first-person plural pronoun (We) to the first-person singular form (I) whenever he is referring to himself. The teacher's rationale in this case may be to help the student avoid one type of grammatical inaccuracy or stylistic pompousness in his writing. Though seemingly appropriate on the surface, this sort of recommendation may in fact be unsuitable in the light of the student's content schemata that are characterized by the Confucian concept of people's being interdependent rather than independent. Thus, it is likely that the student's use of "We" to refer to himself is not symptomatic of a grammar or style problem but simply a manifestation of the Oriental belief in "I am many; I am not alone" (Scovel 1983:90). To put it in another light, the teacher's judgement concerning what appears to be a case of simple pronoun change in the student's composition might introduce a new world view into the discoursal context that is alien to the student's content schemata, and consequently cause more learning difficulties than are solved at that point.

In addition to the unwitting infusion of his own consciousness into the student's discourse, it is possible that, in the absence of shared content schemata between the parties, the ESL writing teacher may regard certain papers written by foreign students as being inadequate or illogical, not necessarily for textual reasons but perhaps due to one of the parties' lack of background knowledge about the topic or the parties' lack of understanding of each other's cultural consciousness. For example, in a composition on courtship patterns, a Nigerian student tried to describe the differences between Nigerian courtship patterns and those of the United States. The grammar in the text was virtually impeccable, and the overall rhetorical structure was appropriate; yet the composition was graded down for lack of development and substantive content in the paragraph devoted to the American patterns of courtship. That particular paragraph was only half the length of the paragraph on Nigerian patterns, and it said, in essence, that there is an absence in the United States of the patterns of courtship which exist in Nigeria, without mentioning the actual nature of the American patterns. In other words, the section about

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American patterns was treated in terms of what *does not* exist vis-a-vis the Nigerian context rather than what *does* exist in the American context. In this case, the student had only sketchy knowledge of American courtship and was thus able to offer only gross oversimplifications; he was sure only that the Americans do not have the same patterns as the Nigerians, and this knowledge was based primarily on his limited personal observation of male-female relationships in this country. Similarly, on a writing assignment dealing with water pollution, an Egyptian student's paper was found to be "illogical" because of the mismatch between the reader's expectations and the writer's product. Whereas the teacher anticipated that the student would associate water pollution with urban industrial areas, the student thought of water pollution in connection with rural regions. Obviously, each party was approaching the topic from his own cultural framework—the teacher thinking of the chemically contaminated water sources in industrial settings as opposed to the clean water of non-urban areas (most often the case in the U.S.), and the student associating water pollution with the lack of proper sanitation facilities in remote rural contexts as opposed to the clean potable water supplies of urban areas in Egypt.[2]

As these few illustrations suggest, an appropriate evaluation of student compositions in ESL necessitates the native English-speaking teacher's taking into account not only textual properties but also the intended message. This is possible only if the teacher is acquainted with the culture-based content schemata of the students on a variety of topics or themes that will be assigned in the course. The teacher's access to this distinct background knowledge and cognitive processes will enable him to perceive the meaning(s) of the text in its own cultural terms and judge the suitability of the grammatical and/or rhetorical patterns used to convey that meaning. Such a thorough perspective of the text on the part of the teacher, encompassing discoursal and textual properties as well as their interrelationship, is likely to bring about proper interpretation and/or evaluation as well as better learning on the part of the student.

Although the teacher's familiarity with the content schemata of his students is quite beneficial, one must realize that this knowledge should not lead to the utilization of instructional strategies whereby students are encouraged to write Engish compositions primarily within the experiential and conceptual framework of their own world views, with the anticipation that their ideas will always be properly interpreted by the teacher. While this might be a suitable pedagogic strategy in numerous EFL contexts overseas where student populations tend to be culturally homogeneous—with the teacher himself being most likely from the same cultural background, in ESL programs in English-speaking countries conscious efforts should be made to use the teacher's knowledge as a point of departure for guiding students to write for the expectations of the target audience whose culturally determined content schemata are different from their own. Teachers of ESL writing in English-speaking countries already concentrate on training their students to write in tune with the linguistic and rhetorical criteria of the British or American culture. For one thing, students learn how to make an accurate and appropriate use of grammatical constructions and lexical forms in their written discourse in English. For another, they acquire the necessary rhetorical signals which would help the native English speaker to understand the purpose of their writing (to inform, to convince, to entertain), their attitude toward their topic (committed, aloof, ironic), and the logical strategies (induction, deduction, comparison and contrast) they pursue (Eskey 1979). What needs to be done, in addition, is to enable students to develop an awareness of the differences between their own content schemata and those of native English speakers in order to satisfy the expectations of the target audience on discoursal grounds as well. In this respect, they should be led to realize that their target audience may not be as cross-culturally sophisticated as their teacher on one hand, and that interpretation and/or evaluation problems which their compositions might face cannot solely be attributed to textual reasons on the other.

Hence, if they are to write for readers from the English-speaking culture, they need to know about the content schemata of the target audience so as to be able to make themselves adequately understood. And it is up to the ESL writing teacher to provide them with the necessary cross-cultural insights to facilitate their cognitive transition from writing for the consciousness of the native audience into writing for the consciousness of the target audience.

Notes

[1]If there appear to be tints of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in some of the ideas presented in this article, it must be pointed out that the authors do not view individuals as being imprisoned within the conceptual system imposed on them by their language. Instead, what is suggested here is a weak version of the hypothesis in whose framework the contrastive study of rhetorics at the discourse level is considered useful, not only because of differing rhetorical structures among cultures but also because of different individual and social modes of constructing reality according to cultural context.

[2]The examples used in this article have been taken from situations involving foreign students in post-admission ESL writing courses at Ohio State University.

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