California Writing Project  
San Diego, CA  
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Thanks to Jayne Marlink, Faye Peitzman, for inviting me.  

Exciting to be back in California: multicultural, change, infusion and incorporation of cultures into each other, energy, vigor as well as resistance from all sides.  

Your second language learners: an extremely diverse group  
* immigrants,  
* refugees,  
* transnational migrants, (shuttle back and forth, breaking down national boundaries: HK, Korea, Japan, Hispanic world)  
* international students (including those who come expressly for a couple of years of US high schools before college)  
* 1.5 generation students (ESL students educated in US schools), second generation students whose language, and especially writing shows cultural features of their parents,  
* students that John Ogbu calls involuntary minorities – those who came in chains, or whose land was lost through a US-led war, or was stolen in broken treaties, or whose countries’ economies were devastated by US economic policies);  
* mainstream students (whatever their ethnicity, whose thinking and assumptions reflect the dominant values experiences, and cultural orientation of white, middle class America)  

Your students may come from  
• middle class or formerly middle or upper class professional homes where children are expected to become intellectuals, or at least highly intellectually oriented, sometimes learning another language and writing system alongside English in after-school classes  
• homes where parents are illiterate in their first language as well as in their second  
• homes where putting food on the table or dealing with profound cultural dislocation occupy much of the parents’ time and emotional energy  
• homes where the family has just come from a dangerous or life threatening situation, or where family members have been killed  
• homes where the transition to American life has been exciting or a relief (read Finnish poem)  
• many others that you could tell me about  

Your students and their parents may have different attitudes toward learning English  
• they may be eager to assimilate, even pushing the children (or themselves) to forget their home language
• may be of two minds: it’s good to reap the rewards and contribute to the
society, yet troubling, sometimes shocking, when children adopt new cultural
values and attitudes
• may have profound reluctance to integrate themselves into the mainstream,
especially when they have been the target of racism or discrimination (after 9-
11, for example)
• they may be quite ready to learn or have their children learn English but not
realize the profound cultural shift that can occur when one adopts the values
inherent in the writing and speaking styles of another culture
• may come from a country or region where another variety of English is
spoken (India, Nigeria, Singapore, Jamaica). BY 2050, NATIVE SPEAKERS
OF ENGLISH WILL BE 433 MILLION WHILE THOSE WHO HAVE
“NATIVIZED” THE LANGUAGE (OR ALLOWED IT TO EVOLVE)
WILL BE 668 MILLION

Your work as teachers and leaders and mentors of teachers is front line work. It’s not just
helping students from a huge variety of cultures learn English and accommodate
themselves to the new country, but to show your knowledge and valuing of these
cultures. This will help residents understand and appreciate and welcome, and facilitate
the inevitable cultural mixing with the least amount of frustration and backlash on both
sides.

The K-12 classroom shapes language attitudes more than college or research or
government policy. Need to question the native-non-native dichotomy of English, think
in terms of Global English, a multinational language with plural grammatical systems and
diverse norms and conventions in different communities. And think in terms of global
systems, global citizenship, global decision-making, what it means to be diverse on a
global rather than just a national scale.

Counter ideas that we can’t understand each other unless we speak one language or
dialect or use one style of expression (which incorporates cultural values of one group)

(PNG has 800 languages for 5 million people and provides K-2 in 380 languages plus
pidgin; South Africa, reacting to apartheid policies that used English as a “divide and
rule” policy, now recognizes 11 official languages, English being one)

I’d like us to be thinking about these questions as we look at the cultural issues in writing
for school that I’ve identified in Listening.

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So I’d like to start by talking a bit about the insights I gained when doing the research for
Listening; then look together at some examples of college ESL student papers AND/OR
high school papers.
In Listening I identified 3 main differences between ways world majority cultures and mainstream US culture approach oral and written communication:

1. a preference for indirect forms of discourse vs. an expectation of straightforwardness and specificity
2. the promotion of the solidarity or harmony of the group over the ideas and goals and desires and choices of the individual
3. a tendency to value ancient knowledge and wisdom over novelty and creativity, especially in one’s role as a student

THESE VALUES AND COMMUNICATION STYLES are interlocking and very deep rooted: they are learned in early childhood and thus may not be recognized as cultural at all.

Because of the human tendency to see one’s own point of view as natural and normal and the “other’s” point of view as illogical and/or undesirable, world majority values of indirection, holism, collectivism, and deference to authority and the wisdom of the past are often misunderstood or caricatured in racist discourse in this country.

This makes it all the more difficult to talk about cultural differences at all because just bringing them up seems like it’s pointing out weaknesses of those who are most vulnerable or making them seem weird or inhuman (orientalizing), or making the differences seem inherent or innate (essentializing), which is silly – we learn culture from the day we are born, but we’re not born with culture.

My aim is quite the opposite: I want to talk about differences as legitimate and interesting; I want to talk about the logic behind other ways of seeing the world -- rather than concentrating on our human similarities, which of course there are many.

But let’s get into some concrete examples of how these differences affect the ways students write (or approach writing – since like any fledgling writers they may be trying to achieve something they’re not able to do very well.)

The easiest to recognize is a preference, on the part of many of the world majority, for subtle or discursive communication that puts the responsibility for interpretation and understanding on the audience, rather than on the speaker or writer...

I have noticed several broad strategies for indirection: first, omission, that is, ideas left out, or packed into long sentences or tangled together in short paragraphs.

In graduate student work, for example, the most important analysis might be relegated to a footnote when it seems more logical to the US instructor to place it in a prominent position in the text and expand upon it. In introductory composition or high school writing the main idea may be intentionally unstated or so understated that it’s impossible to find.
Transitions, either the single word variety (*moreover, nevertheless, although, additionally*) or phrases that link ideas from paragraph to paragraph, may be left out, leaving a series of free-standing statements that are baffling to the mainstream reader.

Or, since “lack of transitions” is so often commented on by English teachers, transition words may be overused or blatant, stitching the prose together clumsily, so that it “doesn’t flow.” Students may use abstract words or generalities that smooth over or obscure the meaning, or attempt extended metaphors or storytelling without explicit analysis that doesn’t quite reach the reader. While all the may look to the US instructor like second language difficulties, and indeed may have something to do with lack of vocabulary or ease with English phrasing, there is also an underlying cultural rationale: to avoid saying things so directly that the reader is insulted, to show respect for the reader’s ability to analyze or make meaning, and to display the intelligence and sophistication of the writer.

Another common strategy for indirection is almost the opposite: rather than leaving things out, the writer adds a great deal of contextual information that is only marginally related to the topic, a strategy which the university often calls digressiveness or rambling or beating around the bush. These strategies are not simply “hot air” or excessive formalities: they are meant to fill the reader in with general background knowledge so that they have more of a holistic sense of the topic and thus can more easily do the analysis themselves; the expectation being that the reader rather than the writer is responsible for the interpretation.

The second major difference (*and here is an example of the signposting that is expected in a culture in which the writer is responsible for the reader's or listener's understanding*) that affects how world majority students write and think about writing is that (*direct statement*) many come from cultures that are more group-oriented, more collectivist, than our very individualist US mainstream culture (*The way I’ve put it sounds like the second major difference is completely separate from the first, although I know they can’t be separated at all, but I am almost forced to say it this way anyway because of the cultural style in which I’ve learned to communicate that analyzes by carving the subject up into discrete bits and putting them back together in different ways – which I have to say has made it very hard to write coherently on this subject, and is one of the reasons why I chose to write my book by telling stories about my interactions with students, rather than in a more academic style, with short quotations or bits of student writing illustrating my points…*)

If you come from a culture that values group solidarity or harmony over self-expression or self-actualization, you learn very early to pay close attention to others’ unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Because you ”know” what others are experiencing, you don’t need to put everything into words. And because you expect others to pay attention to your unexpressed thoughts and feelings, you assign more responsibility for miscommunication to the reader or listener. To build solidarity you might scold your audience or ask a great many rhetorical questions that I as a US mainstream reader might find strange or even insulting. I might gently suggest you are over-generalizing, exaggerating to make a point,
or not bringing in proper evidence, but to you, using mottoes or slogans or talking about “what everybody thinks” adds credence to your argument, because in your experience, in your way of interacting with the world, people tend to agree to agree for the sake of solidarity, and if they don’t, they could be persuaded, or exhorted with emotional appeals, to come around.

In a group-oriented society, questions about personal identity – who you really are or what you are becoming, what your true voice sounds like or whether you can make your mark on the world before you retire – all of these are much less important than your feelings of belonging and connectedness and agreement with what everyone in your group thinks, and does, and aspires to. Thus, when you write, you are not so concerned about whose ideas are whose. Intellectual property isn’t much of an issue to you. The idea of plagiarism may seem curiously illogical. And though you have heard time and time again that copying an author’s words without giving credit is wrong, or following an already established line of reasoning too closely is not what’s expected in college, you’re not convinced that this is true. Because when people are assumed to be interconnected, or at least more connected than separate, why does it matter so much whose words are whose? And if someone important and skilled enough to write an academic book already said something highly intelligent, why should a mere student try to improve on that?

This brings me to the third major difference, the valuing of ancient wisdom and authority over the student’s own novel or creative ideas. Some of you may have read the chapter in my book called “What is ancient is also original” where my friend Kamala, who was born in Sri Lanka and had spoken English for 30 years, realized, through conversations and interviews with me for my research, that she had been misunderstanding her professor’s use of the word “original” for the first several years of her Master’s program. Kamala’s professor had been unhappy with her work for some time; in fact, he had lost his temper on several occasions, saying, “This is not original! You can’t just keep reproducing what others have done!” What the professor didn’t realize was that Kamala’s sense of the word “original” was “of the origin,” the original texts, the original, ancient ideas. She told me that the way she was educated by her family and society, “you have to search, you have to understand what has happened there, in that time, in that original work. So by simply learning it, it becomes original to you.”

As writing teachers we are used to characterizing these three values orientations as flaws. We use negative words like “rambling” “incoherent” “mouthing the words of the professor,” “disjointedness,” “circularity,” “beating around the bush,” “lacking evidence,” and so on.

Let’s look at the FIRST PAGE OF YOUR HANDOUT to see some other ways we could characterize these tendencies or values

Student papers: Supercop; Vietnamese boat people; others.
CCCC statements: Students’ Right to their own Language; National Language Policy; 2nd language teaching.

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“Voluntary Immigrants”

Finnish poem (from Red, White, and a Paler Shade of Blue: Poems on the Finnish American Experience. Mary Kinnunen, Ed. (FinnFest USA 1996)

Mother, mine
What did you dream of when you were a child?
Living through famine
Eating bark gruel
Pinecones as toys
Working a year to earn shoes

Mother, mine
What did you dream of coming to America?
Traveling steerage
Body to body
Seasick and hungry
Will want ever cease?

Mother, mine
Finally, open country
Blue skies
Clean, clear days
Work was always yours
Work was a gift to share

Mother, mine
Now you had family.

“Involuntary Immigrants”
Language Diversity in the Classroom (Smitherman and Villanueva, Eds. 2003) (and article by that name by Swearington and Pruett)

Mother to Son
Langston Hughes

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor –
Bare.
But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’
And turning corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now –
For I’s still goin’, honey.
I’s still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

Runa Pacha
Diana Garcia

The feeling grows for weeks
before I realize
what had happened.
I got lost in the white
of concrete and motors
where I hadn’t heard a hint
of unaccented Spanish in days,
just guttural clipped tones,
news of lines drawn close,
news of laws to drive
the undocumented south.
An unexpected melody
from a bamboo flute,
a quena tuned to the key
of la, falls into the crack.
My lips curl like a cat’s
better to taste the sound
with my teeth. I round
my tongue to say mucho gusto,
igualmente, but the flaccid muscles
catch on oval tones.
Panicked, I swear to grow
my hair again, let that hank
hang down my back.
I swear to begin each day
with songs sung in softer oooo’s,
rolling rrrr’s lilting llll’s, rub awake
the parts I’ve learned to muffle
in this inhospitable air.