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Maintaining Texuality: A Case Study of the Problematic Use of Academic Discourse Conventions in the Thesis Text of an International Graduate Student

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Maintaining textuality: a case study of the problematic use of academic discourse conventions in the thesis text of an international graduate student

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Abstract

Supervising research students in the writing up of their theses may present special difficulties when these students do not come from an English speaking background (NESBs). Very often, the textual problems are attributed by both supervisors and students to "problems with English". My purpose in presenting this representative case study is to show that 1) the major problems in the text examined are due to the student's misapprehensions about and inadequate command of the institutionalized conventions of thesis writing; 2) these problems are cross-cultural; 3) such phrases as "problems with English" are reductive in that they obscure full recognition and acknowledgment of the complexity of the writing culture students enter and its cultural constructedness; and 4) there is a need to decontextualize our language in communicating with NESBs about their texts if we are to help them master a very complex range of discourse conventions.

In providing academic support to students in the Graduate School at the Australian National University (ANU), I have worked on a variety of academic texts with both coursework and research students from across the disciplines. The problems evidenced in the texts of international research students who come from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESBs) are often attributed by supervisors and the students themselves to students' insufficiencies in the command and control of the English language.

In presenting this case study, I want to show that this type of thinking may deflect attention from further difficulties students encounter in a new writing culture (see Felix, 1993; Radloff & Samson, 1992 Ballard & Clanchy, 1984 & 1991a). The case is representative in that the types of problems discussed here are akin to those seen in the texts of other international graduate students struggling to master a range of discourse conventions appropriate to their

different disciplinary writings. References are made to other students' theses so as to extend the framework of discussion.

The text used in this study was a Master by research thesis (50,000 words). This was produced in the Social Sciences by an international student who came to me just weeks before his visa was due to expire and he was due to submit. The student thought he had produced his "final copy" whereas the supervisor thought, as he put it, the student had "a problem with English". Close textual analysis showed that English was not the most serious problem although there were certainly language problems requiring attention if meaning was not to be compromised, obscured or entirely prohibited. The major problem in the text examined was with the student's misapprehensions about and inadequate command of the institutionalized conventions of thesis writing.

Theoretical background

Twenty-five years of contrastive rhetoric studies leave no doubt about the rhetorical complexity of academic texts. These were begun with Kaplan (Leki, 1991) who points out that a "text is a complex multidimensional structure" and the dimensions involved include at least "syntactic, semantic, and discoursal features, elements of cohesion, coherence considerations of schematic structure, audience and sociolinguistic function" (Kaplan, 1988, p. 279).

Apart from the complex, multidimensional nature of texts, including theses, further questions important to my purposes here are: Can we see in these texts institutionalized and conventionalized properties? Do texts reproduce themselves by way of these interacting conventionalized properties? Are the frameworks set up by the codes and conventions of thesis writing fixed or open to negotiation? Are these frameworks of schemata then enabling or restricting? And where are we to locate meaning if there are such conventionalized properties?

Genre theorists and writers in this tradition provide useful insights into some of the issues raised by the above set of questions. Bakhtin, in discussing the ways in which speech genres organize our speech notes that there are "relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*" (1986, p.78). In short, there are generic forms, which are seen by him as the normative forms an utterance or written work acquires in practice. While genre is defined in much greater detail by Swales (1990, Part 2:3), he too emphasises the generic patternings inherited and reproduced in writings of discourse communities.

The institutionalized conventions of writing with which I am concerned in this paper are among the "normative forms" of thesis writing; but they are not confined necessarily to the thesis genre(s). Here I would invoke Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality" (Noth, 1990, p.323; see also Spivey, 1990, on "intertext") to argue that codified and conventionalized properties of a thesis may recur both in other disciplinary writings, across disciplinary boundaries and even outside Academe, perhaps too across cultures. For example, some, but not all, conventionalized properties of academic argument may be shared by a Political Science coursework essay, a book review or a PhD article in that discipline, in a History or Geography

Master thesis, or in a lengthy article reviewing the economic difficulties of the Clinton government appearing in the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine.[1]

What we are seeing here is an intersection of texts and codes, "the absorption and transformation of another text" (Noth 1990, p.323). Determination of genre is then more complex than mere identification of the conventions being used, and beyond the scope of this present discussion. Still it is possible to use genre not as a descriptive or prescriptive term but as an intellectual construct useful for the purposes of analysis.

Whereas Bakhtin's observation of conventional and codified properties is text centred, Culler (1974) is concerned with how we make sense of texts. He therefore shifts his attention to the reader in defining genre as "a set of expectations, a set of instructions about the types of coherence one is to look for and the ways in which sequences are to be read" (Culler, 1974, p.32). This is an important shift as it implies that the meaning of these conventionalized properties is as much in the culture as in the written word or text. This in turn is relevant to how we critique theses, in particular to the language we use in communicating with students about their texts, as we shall see.

Dwight Atkinson, while acknowledging the "serious interest" shown by linguists and other scholars "in the notion that the written word may be significantly shaped by social or institutional constraints on form and content" (1991, p.57), argues that there is now a need to move away from more descriptive studies (see Swales, 1990, Part 3:7; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Harris, 1990) to consider a theoretical basis for these studies. Towards this end, he has proposed a *Multifunctional Model of Written Discourse Conventions* which hypothesizes "the interactive functionality of discourse conventions in the cognitive, social, and textual domains" (1991, p.63).

According to Atkinson, conventions in the cognitive domain function on two levels: 1) at the level of discourse comprehension, where these are said to "perform an important *schema-input* as in the case of 'Dear Sir' activating the conventions of business letter writing and 2) at the level of *processing/production economy*" (1991, p.63). The second broad domain, the social, concerns the place of conventions in the "constitution and regulation of social groups". These socializing conventions for construing reality, which are said to be basically non-linguistic, are referred by him to the "can-do" order. To illustrate their function, Atkinson comments on the way "community norms of written discourse are fostered through authorities as is seen, for example, in the regulatory role played by instruments such as academic style manuals" (1991, p.64). Appropriating the conventions of academic referencing is part of being socialized into a discipline, though I would not see these conventions as non-linguistic. Finally, Atkinson reviews the role of conventions in the creation and maintenance of textuality. As he says, "linguistically and rhetorically, discourse conventions function at the *macro-rhetorical*, *rhetorical*, *phrasal-clausal*, and *lexical* levels of the text" (1991, p.65).

In the analysis to follow, I have modified and adapted Atkinson's general model to suit my particular purposes. The textual problems of the case study will be considered under the following headings: Macro and micro-conventions (including the cognitive); Social domain conventions; English language difficulties (which include lexical choice, syntactical

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[1] The referencing systems required of argument in the academic context would not of course apply in these two

difficulties and aspects of text cohesion). Overall, my main concern is with textual maintenance[2]. Analysis of the text is followed by a brief discussion of cross-cultural meanings, and concluding comments.

Textual problems of the case study

Macro and micro-rhetorical conventions

The macro-domain involves the architectural structure of the text, which is a type of "overall design coherence" (Atkinson, 1991, p.65). Achieving design coherence is generally easier in science theses because of a well-defined, conventionalized patterning of the architectural structure of the text, that is: *Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion*. It is fairly common for science theses to show some variation on this institutionalized schema, though of course not all science theses are suited to it.

As there is no equivalent schema for the humanities and social sciences, research students in the disciplines of these areas often find structuring at the architectural level difficult. With reading and field research complete, students can find it difficult to stand back from the mass of data swamping their minds and so begin the work of design. Thinking through higher level structure is demanding because it requires an ability to see the thesis as a constructed whole, to see the interaction of the various parts, their functional coherence as a vehicle for research objectives. That is not to say that students cannot help themselves at all. Ideas about how to structure their own texts can be generated by viewing other theses in their disciplines that have already passed examination, though it is not likely any one structure will be exactly suited to an individual's particular research needs.

In the case study, the student received considerable help from his supervisor with the architectural or spatio-semantic structure of the text. My later comparison of the chapters I viewed with those of the final copy showed that some chapter titles were altered, whole sections were moved between chapters, other sections were cut back or expanded on or had their titles altered with a view to ensuring clear focus in line with new chapter headings. More in-depth, focused discussion was achieved in the text by way of these shifts and changes. For example, one chapter heading initially covered two topics in a general way: land reform and capitalist penetration. The two topics were eventually given separate chapters, their sub-headings indicating very precise concerns: in the first case, the creation of an independent class of small land holders; in the second, the transition to mixed modes of production. The extent and nature of the macro-structural changes made to the text during the time I worked with the student testify to the difficulty he experienced on this level.

Most of my work with the student involved assistance with micro-level conventions. Atkinson says of this level:

> The coherence effects at this level again appear to depend on top-level structural principles of overall "design". At the same time, it may be assumed from their positioning in continuous text that conventions at the rhetorical level are relatively more "integrative" in function than the above-

2 Place names and so forth have been altered in the text so as to protect anonymity, to avoid identification of the

> mentioned macro-rhetorical conventions, whose main function is to partition
> and divide text for purposes of spatio-semantic organization. (1991, p.66)

The problems on this level were serious in that they tended to recur frequently throughout the thesis, causing confusion and semantic obscurantism. For ease of discussion, I have grouped these as follows: a) focus and paragraph rupture; b) repetition; c) argument and faulty justification. Just a few representative examples of each are provided.

a) focus and paragraph rupture

On the level of the paragraph, across paragraphs, and in lengthier stretches of writing, focus problems were many and varied; to produce sound text required considerable effort from both me and the student.

Split focus was one repetitive problem as illustrated in the following example of paragraph structure:

> • (1) (*Topic Sentence*) Some of the European institutions like the Education, Constitution form of Government, Christian Church, and capitalist mode of production were intruded into Makua through the agents of the Christian missionaries.
> • (2) The first Europeans to arrive on Makuan shores were…
> • (3) Most of these explorers reported…
> • (4) Smith was particularly impressed by the industry of the Makuans
> • (5) The land was cultivated etc…

Here, topic sentence (1) sets up the **expected** paragraph focus: discussion of the way European institutions infiltrated Makuan society. But in fact the **actual** focus of the paragraph from (2)-(5) is the reaction of the first Europeans to what they found.

A second example shows *interrupted paragraph flow*:

> • (1) (*Topic Sentence*) The land reform initiated by X was part of the major social reform in society.
> • (2) The outcome of the land reform, **however**, demonstrated the interactions between internal and external factors, human agencies and structural forces, material and non-material factors.
> • (3) Contact with the Europeans was one of the major factors behind this radical transformation…
> • (4) This [the reform] had led to … and …
> • (5) Makua has become increasingly vulnerable to …
> • (6) The historical significance of these revolutionary years is …

Here again, topic sentence (1) sets up the **expected** paragraph focus: the role of the land reform in overall social reform. But sentence (2) marks a shift with 'however', to a **newly expected** focus: the outcome of the land reform and what this illustrated. Nevertheless, the **actual** focus in the rest of the paragraph fulfils the expectations of the topic sentence (1). Sentence two, in short, disrupts paragraph coherence.

By leaving the sentences unpartitioned in the following paragraph, I hope to illustrate more clearly the problem of interrupted paragraph flow:

> • (1) (*Topic Sentence*) The system of ideologies that concealed the contradictions in society was no longer effective as the outbreak of civil war demonstrated the exposure of contradictions into the surface. (2) There is no evidence to suggest any direct connection between the impact of the Europeans and the outbreak of the civil war. (3) It is important to point out that the early Europeans ethnographic record has underemphasised the conflicting tendencies in society. (4) They failed to acknowledge the contradictions between the ruling class and the ruled, and the power structure among the chiefs of the ruling class. (5) There is no doubt that the impact of the European Culture contributed to the emergence of the contradictions that were previously concealed. (6) For instance, some of the earliest explorers, such as …, recognised the desperation of the Makuans to trade for European goods. (7) This implies that the recognition of the superiority of the European guns may have led to the changes in the attitudes of some chiefs. (8) This thereby strengthened X's opposition to the central power in Lai. (9) The early stage of contact demonstrates a situation where the Makuans only welcomed aspects of European culture that were directly of use to them. (10) However, they were not in complete control of the situation because some elements of Western culture, like Christianity and capitalism, forced their way and established as a part of the compromised Makuan culture.

Clearly, this stretch of discussion does not make sense though it certainly carries meanings. One might perhaps be forgiven for thinking that there is a problem with the 'English' which is by no means perfect. But there is a more serious problem. This paragraph is developed by way of *free association of ideas*, the sort of thing that we do in our heads when we are thinking, jumping from one idea to another, indifferent to logical thinking. If we were to put our ideas on paper just as they occur in our thought we would get something akin to the above.

This paragraph breaks the institutionalized conventions of coherence flow in academic discourse. In other words, there is a conventional expectation of logical thinking of ideas within paragraphs. To construct a 'respectable' paragraph out of the above material, it was necessary to remove sentences (3) and (4) and work them into the previous paragraph which focused on the European ethnographic record. Logical connectives were inserted where appropriate to ensure more explicit signalling of the line of discussion and certain sentences reworked for clarity of expression.

b) repetition

Another recurring problem in this text was repetition, where the student was inclined to repeat himself, often at some length, because of the way in which he had structured discussions in various sub-sections or chapters. This too, I think, could be related in part to his general difficulties with the academic conventions of focus. To rid the text of repetition, it was at times necessary to undertake radical restructuring. At other times, by clarifying sub-sectional focus it was possible simply to omit repetitious material altogether, or to substitute some phrase such as the following for several lines of repetitious discussion:

…, as pointed out and discussed in the previous chapter (ref)

Such metalinguistic phrases have the additional effect of contributing to overall coherence by signalling the links between discussions in different parts of the text.

Often repetition appeared to be a laboured device, in place of more economical strategies, to get a discussion underway. The student would begin a section by lengthily summarizing what had gone before to ease himself into a new discussion. Here, the cause of the repetition seemed to be a lack of schema-input in the cognitive domain. Because of his limited understanding of the conventions of structuring, he was unable to link his stretches of discussion economically. In one case, it was possible to substitute for a lengthy, repetitious paragraph, a tight transition sentence to the new topic, followed by two sentences detailing specific section concerns.

c) argument and faulty justification

Problems of justification, that is providing plausible evidence for arguments, were less marked in the case study than those relating to structure and focus. Sometimes there were generalized assertions as, for example:

This alliance influenced the economic and land policies

No further information was given about how the alliance exerted its influence. Problems of justification were easy to deal with, however. These usually required no more that a 'how?' or 'why?' in the margin; the student always had the answers to hand. The fact that he did not always think to include vital evidential information suggested, however, incomplete acculturation to the conventions of argument.

There were other problems where it was more difficult to negotiate the 'expected' textual meanings. At one point the student mentioned that another scholar had developed a theory of migration through his interpretation of a creation myth. He then applied this theory in a context of analysis over two pages of discussion. This led to a somewhat confused discussion where it was difficult for a reader to be sure whether the problems lay with the original theory, its derivative basis, the student's understanding of this theory, or his faulty application of it.

But the textual inadequacies here were not simply a 'content' problem – some inadequacy was in the student's knowledge. In talking through this problematic section with the student, it was clear that he did understand his material well. However, he was not at all sure about how to write it up. He was not aware that the context of his own writing required some explanation of the theory's derivative basis, the method of derivation and some justification of this, if he himself were to produce plausible argument. What I am suggesting is that there *are* institutionalized expectations of content schema in argument with which this stretch of writing failed to comply.

It is worth taking a little further this discussion differentiating content problems from those relating to the use of conventionalized content schema in argument. In the case study, there was a striking example of a content problem; in this instance, confused understanding of theoretical material concerning stratification, defined below:

> Stratification is a theory that can be roughly summed up as follows: Social differences become social stratification when people are ranked hierarchically along some dimension of inequality, whether this be income, wealth, power, prestige, age, ethnicity, or some other characteristic.
>
> <div align="right">(Penguin Dictionary of Sociology p.243)</div>

Stratification clearly implies hierarchy of some sort. But during the student's application of this theory over four pages of discussion about early modes of production and social organization, we come across sentences such as the following:

> • Brown (1988) and Massey (1991), among others, have supported the arguments that the Bailu social organisation was highly stratified, but in a different form of stratification from that which developed and was adopted locally in Makua.
> • According to Smith (1992), the form of stratification in the marine based economy reflected that everybody had equal access to exploit and consume…
> • Such socio-economic conditions demonstrated egalitarianism in terms of equal access to sources of economic livelihood.

The attempt to apply stratification theory seems to defeat the apparent purpose of establishing the full egalitarianism of the socio-economic organization of the primitive Bailu culture. Content problems of this type, where there is weak understanding of the subject matter, do not fit in Atkinson's model of interactive functionality because they are not related to written discourse conventions. Nevertheless, they must be worked through if textuality is to be maintained.

Another problem in the text being reviewed, which suggested poor acculturation to the conventions of academic argumentation, was the use of overlong quotes, including a quote a page long. In talking with NESBs about why this happens, they often say they quote so much because they cannot find better English to express what another scholar (probably a native speaker) has already said so well. At times, this may be so. But generally this over reliance on quoted material shows deficient understanding of the conventions associated with using primary and secondary source material in text production; for example, as authoritative support in developing one's own argument.

Social domain conventions

Socialization into the academic tribes, as Becher (1989) aptly names them is perhaps best left to other contexts of discussion, detailing ritualistic academic behaviours. Yet one might say that maintaining textuality is itself a ritualistic mastering of the 'dialect of the tribe(s)', to use Eliot's words. Unless an oral is held, when examiners pass a thesis do they not do so solely on the basis of textual meanings conveying an acceptable level of socialization into a discipline? Here socialization is used broadly to include such matters as demonstrated capacity for quality of research.

One manifestation of ritualistic academic behaviour relates to the use of such intertext markers as references and citations. Generally, the citation of source material in this thesis showed that the student was fairly competent in his use of referencing conventions. But acquiring the conventions of academic referencing is often difficult for NESBs and can lead

not only to confusion about 'who is speaking' in the text, but also to charges of plagiarism. An example of this from the case study can be used to illustrate what I mean.

The opening sentence of a paragraph was as follows:

> (1) Nevertheless, Smith and Brown did not rule out the existence of agricultural production.

This paragraph was then developed by way of the following three sentences:

> (2) The settlement pattern of [the] prehistoric population indicates…
> (3) The economic reason was primary because…
> (4) The ecological reason, however, is that…

Here there is no was of telling whether any or all the above three ideas belong to the student or whether he is still drawing on material from Smith and Brown. Students often think that a single reference somewhere in a paragraph is sufficient documentation. Even those who suspect this might be insufficient remain unclear about what to do. Only after discussion of the conventions was this student able to reference correctly along the following lines:

> Nevertheless, Smith and Brown did not rule out the existence of agricultural production. In **their discussion** of… they showed that the settlement pattern of the prehistoric population indicated… **They also noted** that the economic reason was primary because… However, the ecological reason was also seen **by them** as…

In this case, the student was not interpolating any ideas of his own. But over lengthy stretches of discussion where writers are both drawing on external sources and interpolating their own ideas at different points of the discussion, improper referencing can lead to reader confusion.

English language difficulties

So far I have said nothing about the role of English is maintaining textuality, mainly because I did not consider English the major textual problem in this case. This does not mean that there was not ample evidence of English language error, which, on a scale of very low to very high, I would classify as 'medium level error'.

On the lexical level, there were difficulties with prepositions and poor diction choice on occasions. There were also cohesive problems with determiners, connectives, and so forth. Some of the more obvious syntactical problems were misplaced verbs, wrong tense usage, poor subject/verb agreement and noun/pronoun agreement, difficulties with pronouns generally and confusion about the plural form. At times, syntax was very confused as in the following:

> This means that the people's mentality and consciousness were affected by the changes in their surroundings, which was embraced by the dialectical interaction between the material and the non-material aspects of society.

It is hard to work out just what this sentence means and there were others like it. Here, part of the reason for the confusion may be difficulty in using the disciplinary language.

Where expression was very problematic, the student was asked to rewrite after discussion with me about what he was trying to say, or I would help in the rewriting. While I often did correct textual error, I was also concerned that the student should learn himself to overcome the more striking language problems.

Even at this late stage of his enrolment, it was possible to identify repeated errors and to have the student work on them. For example, in the first chapter I saw, the logical connective "however" was repeatedly misused, confounding the flow of the argument. There were also frequent problems with the determiners "it", and "this" or "these", usually because of floating or missing referents. And, as Clanchy and Ballard point out, "where the reference is imprecise, the entire vessel of reasoning can become unstable" (1989, p.21).

My approach to the above two problems was to identify for the student the different contexts of misusage, the semantic difficulties occasioned by such misusage and how these might be overcome. With submission of the second chapter to me, the student had worked these serious problems out of his writing, which suggested a substantial breakthrough in his understanding. Only on a few occasions in the remaining chapters, was "it" used in an imprecise or wrong way. Still, other problems with English remained to the very end as might be expected.

Nevertheless, it is true to say that if the sole problem of this text being reviewed had been 'English', then the thesis would have been ready for submission after three or four days of tough editing and re-writing by the student (and probably me). As it was, the student worked with both myself and his supervisor on this text for over a period of two and a half months.

Discussion

The foregoing discussion shows that this student had produced a very flawed text, a malfunctioning text we might say, in terms of the interactive functionality of academic discourse conventions. What particularly struck me initially though, was the enormity of the structural and focus problems, with so little time to remedy them.

My way of working with the student was to read the thesis, a chapter at a time, identify the problems as I saw them, discuss these with the student while pointing out why they were problems and how he might remedy them. He would then go away to work on the chapter, and rework the next chapter as well before submitting it to me. Once the chapter was returned to me and reworked yet again by the student, it was submitted to the supervisor, who would suggest further textual improvements to which the student would attend.

The student was quite adept at working on the textual problems once he knew what was expected of him. Even so, in the last chapter I received from him, the structure was very poor in two particular sub-sections, covering about ten pages. This time I simply said that the structure had fallen apart and he needed to rework the sections. Two days later the material was presented again to me and the structure of both sections was near perfect. What this suggested was that, while the student might still not recognize, unaided, structural breakdown in his text, he was now competent to remedy this once it was pointed out, without any further instruction at all. He had obviously made considerable progress in a very short time.

Cross-cultural meanings

While the above analysis details problems that arise from a student's lack of familiarity with academic discourse conventions, it is still not clear whether or not it can be said that these problems were cross-cultural. The question, I think, is not whether problems in applying written discourse conventions are confined to the texts of NESBs. There is no doubt that many of these problems are also evident in the texts of research students from and English speaking background (ESBs). Usually though, they appear in early thesis drafts, particularly among the class of writers Phillips and Pugh refer to as "holists" who "can only think as they write and compose a succession of complete drafts" (1987, p.58). The question is whether these conventions can be seen as culture specific and whether, therefore, many international NESB students are seen to be entering an alien culture of discourse.

Kaplan's notion of the "oriental spire" (1966), set up by him to distinguish Eastern rhetorical structures from more linear Western counterparts, has recently been questioned, though it should be said that Kaplan himself did recognize a variety of rhetorical structures within a given culture. Taylor and Chen suggest that we need to take care in making generalizations about cross-cultural differences, noting for example that "discourse structures in social science of some Anglo-American Marxists writing in English might be much closer to those of a German Marxist writing in German than to those of an Anglo-American liberal empiricist in either language (1991, p.321). This observation is reasonable in the context of writing that is organized along conceptual rather than empirical lines, where theoretical concepts are the determinants of organization (MacDonald, 1989). Still, many scholars continue to generalize cross-cultural differences and there seem to be sound reasons for doing so.

Ballard and Clanchy maintain that "in many traditions of Asian scholarship there is, in fact, no requirement to argue, to resolve ambiguities or dilemmas, to reach clearcut conclusions" (1991b. p.33). Similarly, Clark has remarked that Asian students are "not imbued with a Socratic approach to education" (1992, p.14). Dunbar has pointed out that because of a strong oral tradition the skills of writing are "not popularly fostered" among Indonesian students (1991, p.168). Hinds (1983 & 1989) has worked on Japanese texts, identifying unique rhetorical structures in Japanese writings, as well as in those of other Asian cultures; and Ginsburg (1992) has argued equally strongly for generalized cognitive and rhetorical differences between Western and Chinese writings.

Certainly my own experience of working with international graduate students suggests that the cross-cultural differences cannot be easily put aside. Here I am thinking of three different PhD students from China all working in related fields, whose case histories support and reinforce my belief that the problems evident in the case study text were essentially cross-cultural.

The PhD text of one student was well structured but flawed throughout by a lack of critical-evaluative content. He justified this by saying that his purpose was to give the Chinese perspective on events in China to counter prevailing Western views of these same events. He did not think he needed to critically evaluate his original source material gathered from such sources as Chinese newspapers, Chinese government documents, Chinese journal articles and so forth, or to probe possible reasons for differences in Chinese and Western perspectives even though he was using his source material as a basis to criticize, demolish even, western perspectives. It would seem this student was working in a "relational" as opposed to a

Western "analytical" style, a cognitive style which, according to Ginsburg, characterizes Asian practice (1992, p.7). It was this lack of critical analysis that led to what we would interpret as 'poor argument'.

The second student was sent by his supervisor because of his 'English'. It seemed to me, however, that he had enthusiastically taken up Polonius's dictum "by indirections find directions out"! In other words, the rhetorical structuring of his discussions was invariably indirect. There was much inbuilt repetition within and between chapters because of this method; there was no explicit signalling of the main arguments being developed in the different sub-sections; and no attempt to relate points made back to any identifiable arguments. In short, it was impossible to get a grip on any clear lines of argument that related back to a thesis. As well, critiques of other authors were not worked in at appropriate points of discussion but were clumped together at the end of the chapters almost in appendix fashion.

On each occasion of discussion, the reader was led through what seemed a mass of undirected, expository detail towards some conclusion, mysteriously withheld. The text inspired frequent remarks by me such as "what is the point of all this?", "how does this discussion relate to topic?", "where is this going?", "undirected exposition" and so on, all of which I now see as bewildering for the student. Such questions and comments are simply inappropriate. This is because their meanings reside in an academic writing culture to which this student was clearly not acculturated. Such highly contextualized messages cannot be decoded outside the framework of academic conventions of writing to which they refer for their meaning.

Here I am displaying my cultural prejudice in failing to appreciate the subtlety of this student's rhetorical style, the strong inevitability of the conclusions that emerged from what seemed to me a meandering style of exposition. In other words, I was bringing to my reading a set of conventional expectations of academic thesis writing of the social sciences with which this text failed to comply, just as the examiners of his thesis will likely do. His text did carry meanings but it did not carry the *expected* meanings. The text was internally coherent and unified but the student did not use the academic models of unity and coherence *we* deploy in making sense. Again one can turn to Ginsburg for an explanation of the "indirect" oriental method used by this student and see the dominant textual problem as cross-cultural (1991, p.7).

Another point that can be illustrated through the above case is that working in a framework of institutionalized and conventionalized expectations of text production is restricting, but it is also enabling. It is only through knowledge and understanding of the institutionalized conventions of academic writings that a student acquires the power to negotiate the meanings being produced. In other words, it is fine to manipulate the codes and conventions to one's own semantic purposes, to produce a highly original sub-text so to speak, but these must be manipulated within the schematic frameworks legitimated by the academic 'gatekeepers', the examiners, the audience for whom the student writes. It is precisely through such negotiation that each text both reproduces and renews the thesis genre, or genres as they may be.

The text of the third student showed highly developed, cognitive and rhetorical skill in manipulating the conventions of written discourse even though this was his first experience of studying in a foreign culture. If then, the conventions are culture specific how did he acquire this knowledge of them? This I cannot really answer. The student did have a strong

background in classical Chinese literature and philosophy, and he had read some Western material in his field before coming to Australia. Here at least was an Asian student who appeared to be imbued with the "Socratic" approach. This case may lend support to the more cautious and qualified appraisal of cross-cultural differences by Taylor and Chen mentioned above.

The major problem with this student's writing *was*, nevertheless, cross-cultural. English language often failed him when developing subtle, theoretical arguments as it tended not to do when writing up more descriptive or empirical data. This is not unusual in the texts of NESBs, or in the texts of some ESBs for that matter. This research student, like so many others, had to work hard to acquire the sophisticated disciplinary language used within a demanding intellectual situation.

Morley, in reviewing perspectives on English for academic purposes, argues that mere linguistic survival is no longer the issue, that more and more demands are being made on all students in graduate studies for sophisticated writing, language and oral communication skills (1991, p.5). I would argue further that supervisors need to take full account of the language demands of their disciplines when accepting international NESBs for study. A high, disciplinary level of theoretical or philosophical material will inevitably put great pressure on a student's language capacity, as shown below.

The following extract in from the PhD text of a student who clearly has a very high level of proficiency in the English language:

> Secondly, I shall examine Brown's concept of truth and power. What I would like to clarify is that Cook's label of 'truth's power dependency' does not adequately capture Brown's conception of the relation between truth and power. Brown's argument is not concerned with developing a foundation for power; nor does he simply reverse Cook's conception of truth. Instead he shows that truth does not stand outside and in opposition to power. The relation between truth and power is one of correlation, complication, mutual production, mutual presupposition. This conception challenges Cook's theory which assumes that truth is opposed to power and the production of truth is free from power.

Yet elsewhere we find a passage like this:

> Brown's **theory**, as well as the **subjugated knowledge** he advocates, "**cannot validate for their knowledge** any superiority according to the standards of truth claims". **Their claims** "count no more and no less than those of the discourses in power—they, too, are nothing than the effects of power they unleash".
>
> Original source:
> **Those** [like Brown] who conquer the theoretical avant-garde of today
> …themselves become the theoretical avant-garde of tomorrow. In any case,
> **they** cannot validate for their knowledge
> …

By returning to the original source of the student's quotation, one sees that she has omitted the subject-actor in transcribing the quoted material in her own work and, in so doing, destroyed the sense of the passage. While this text had few such problem passages, those of the students less proficient in the English language often evidence extensive problems in the more theoretical sections.

As a concluding comment to this section, I would just say this. Given the complexity of the academic texts research students are producing it may be that it is more difficult to identify textual problems as being cross-cultural than it is with those produced by undergraduates. Certainly, in my own experience, some supervisors do have difficulty both in identifying the causes of textual problems of the type discussed here and in advising students on how to remedy these.

Conclusion

The language competencies of second-language students pursuing graduate study surely vary. Some do have serious problems with English and all will need some degree of help with editing of their theses. Still, the tendency to describe all textual problems in terms of English language problems is obviously problematic. Phrases such as "problems with English" are often reductive and inadequate descriptors of the types and range of difficulties international students encounter in producing their texts. Nor so such phrases assist full recognition and acknowledgment of the complexity of the writing culture students enter, just how culturally constructed this is, and how much the different disciplinary writings are constrained by cultural practices.

Most research students have difficulties in mastering the complex conventions of thesis writing, some more than others. But graduate students from other cultures where different writing practices prevail are a special case. If they are to become skilled in western academic discourses they will need to throw off culturally ingrained habits of writing, which is not easy. To help them in this difficult task of transition we who work with them may need to take especial care with *our* language. If the comments we write on texts are to be helpful, we need to decontextualize them. As one student said to me: "My supervisor says there is a problem with my structure, but he doesn't tell me what is wrong with it and how I can fix it. I cannot see this problem". To return to Atkinson's *Multifunctional Model of Written Discourse*, the schema-input function is blocked in this student. How is she to go about remedying the problem when she has no knowledge, or little knowledge, of the complex, conventionalized cultural meanings embedded in the word "structure"? We therefore need to ensure that the language we use in communicating with students about their texts is *outside* the institutionalized frameworks of academic writing which are culture bound.

Nor is textual comment alone sufficient explanation. For understanding to occur, there needs to be dialogue (Taylor, 1993, pp.69-71). In short, there needs to be 'much talk' with students about their textual difficulties. We need to tell them what is wrong, why it is wrong and how they might go about fixing the problem. In this way we may help international graduate students to master more quickly what can only be seen as a very complex range of academic discourse conventions.

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Biographical sketch

I have been working for the past three and a half years as Study Skills Adviser (Graduate School) at the Australian National University. That is, I have been working soley with graduate students in an academic support role. Prior to that I was working at the University of Queensland where I was teaching part-time (6 years) in rhetoric and communication studies in the English department while completing my PhD. Before accepting my present position, my research was confined to Literature studies. I have not as yet published in my new area, though I have produced the following:

Conference Presentations

"International graduate coursework students and the urgency of adapting to new learning strategies" at the **IDP national conference on international education**, Canberra, October 1992.

"Maintaining textuality: A case study of the problematic use of academic discourse conventions in the thesis text of an international graduate student" at conference on "**Improving Supervisory Practice in Research Degree Education—perspectives from the disciplines**", La Trobe University, Melbourne, July 1993.

"Text, context and language: writing problems of international graduate students" at HERDSA (Victorian branch) conference on "**Making a difference: Postgraduate research supervision**", Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, September 1993.

Forthcoming SSC publication

Chapter 8 "Assessment" in *Making the most of your arts degree* (to be published by Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1994).