

# Guiding Asian Students through Acquisition of a New Writing Model<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Many Asian students pursue degree programs at colleges and universities in the United States. They bring a variety of assets that can benefit their studies, including discipline, determination, commitment and knowledge in their fields. Yet many are unfamiliar with the model commonly used for academic writing in U.S. classrooms. In fact, the two dominant writing models are in direct opposition to each other: the knowledge-telling model, with which most Asian students are familiar, and the knowledge-transforming model, which most U.S. instructors expect their students to use. The differences between these writing models are often mistaken for learning problems rather than cultural differences. Even when recognized, these differences present challenges and frustrations for both Asian students and their U.S. instructors. The paper examines the two academic writing models and discusses ways in which their differences may be addressed both in the United States and in the students' countries of origin.

## **Introduction**

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) proposed two writing models that have specific and direct implications for the writing challenges often observed among Asian graduate students who study in American colleges and universities. These are the knowledge-telling and the knowledge-transforming models.

In the *knowledge-telling model*, students write from memory, with little or no transformation; they recite or recall verbatim what was given to them during class lectures, from teacher handouts or course textbooks. At times, written responses in this model may lack organization, as students often write their thoughts in the order in which they occur to them. Grammar and sentence structure are often correct because the student has memorized chunks of information. Yet responses using this writing model strike many American college and university teachers as passive and superficial.

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<sup>1</sup> As you will have noted, my topic is "Guiding Asian Students through Acquisition of a New Writing Model." My relevant experience is primarily with students from China, Japan and Taiwan, a group of international students whom I have taught in the United States for many years. For the purposes of this paper, the term "Asian" thus refers specifically to this subgroup.

### **The Assignment**

The writing assignment that follows was given to first-year graduate students in a literacy course at a university in the United States as part of a take-home assignment in preparation for the course midterm examination. Students responded to the following question: *Most teachers of second language learners agree that error correction has a place in the reading classroom. Yet some teachers “overcorrect.” Why? Discuss at least three common misconceptions that some teachers hold about error correction in the ESL reading classroom?*

### **The Knowledge-Telling Model: Mei Ling’s Composition**

Here one observes the written response of Mei Ling, a graduate student from China.

#### **Essay #1:**

1. Most teachers of second language learners agree that error
2. correction has a place in the reading classroom. Yet, some
3. teachers “overcorrect.” Consequences to overcorrecting include
4. comprehension inhibition, interrupted attention and decreased
5. speed. When teachers interrupt to correct oral reading, reading
6. proceeds on the basis of words rather than phrases, and attention
7. is on words rather than meaning. Moreover, it can create
8. performance anxiety that may have long term effects on academic
9. achievement.
10. There are common misconceptions that some teachers hold
11. about error correction in the reading classroom. Without
12. consistent error correction, individual errors will add up to error
13. in comprehension.
14. Some may misconstrue this analysis of reading behavior as
15. advocating sloppiness or carelessness. But more specifically, the
16. analysis is concerned with the over concern with word accuracy
17. that gets in the way of comprehension. Many teachers have is
18. that the language proficiency growth is a bottom up process, that
19. learners must first be taught the pieces of language—letters then
20. words, then paragraphs, and so on. Work on inflections, subject
21. verb agreement and so forth should be the first priority. This can
22. be termed a subskills approach to instruction.

### **A Brief Analysis**

Mei-Ling relies heavily on the *knowledge-telling* model. Some of the features in her composition are glaring. For the most part, she summarizes material from the textbook rather than analyzing what she has learned. One can almost hear the textbook echoing in her response. Yet no one researcher is ever mentioned or given credit for work or ideas presented in the student's composition. The reader can easily identify where the textbook summary ends and her individual response begins by the sudden appearance of faulty sentence structure and errors in grammar (lines 15-20). There is even a change in the level of vocabulary at these junctures. In addition, she lacks development of her ideas. Paragraph 2 (lines 10-13) has only two sentences. Finally, there is an absence of conclusion with nothing (i.e., no transitional words/devices) to bring the composition to a close.

### **The Knowledge-Transforming Model: Susan's Composition**

Based on the same assignment, Susan, an American-born student, wrote the following essay:

1. As an educator I would certainly agree that error correction
2. has a place in the classroom, yet there are consequences to
3. overcorrecting.
4. Many teachers feel that it is educationally beneficial to correct
5. every word that their students mispronounce when they are
6. reading in the classroom. They become fixated on constantly
7. correcting their pronunciation of words. However, a common
8. misconception is that teachers need to interrupt students when
9. they make mistakes. When teachers interrupt students' reading
10. to correct errors, reading proceeds on the basis of words rather
11. than phrases, and attention is on words rather than meaning
12. (Williams and Capizzi-Snipper, 1990). What they fail to
13. recognize, nevertheless, is that interruptions make
14. comprehension difficult. Students need to explore and practice
15. reading as much as they can — without worrying about making
16. errors so much. If teachers want their students to increase their
17. vocabulary and make fewer mistakes as they read, then they
18. need to give their students the opportunity to do so.
19. A second misconception some teachers hold on to is that
20. they see miscues as evidence of poor skills and therefore
21. concentrate on words rather than constructing meaning.

22. Miscues can be classified into four types: substitution, omission,  
23. insertion, and scramble. If our students make one of these  
24. errors, it is of little value to interrupt them. Research has shown  
25. that when students make these types of reading mistakes, most  
26. miscues preserve the meaning of the reading passage. If the  
27. student cannot make sense out of the reading passage, then they  
28. themselves will make the corrections.

29. A third misconception is that by correcting students when  
30. reading, teachers believe that they are molding students into the  
31. “perfect, model” native speaker. However, the fact of the matter  
32. is that there is no “perfect” native speaker. Even native speakers  
33. when reading make errors, in fact, the same types of errors as  
34. those made by ESL students. Native speakers sometimes omit  
35. words when reading; sometimes they insert words. Yet, they  
36. understand what they are reading. These are called  
37. “performance” errors. Such researchers as Au (1998) addressed  
38. these types of reading errors and found that they do not cause  
39. comprehension problems, and that even native speakers make  
40. performance errors in both reading and speaking. Some speed-  
41. reading courses even train native speakers when they are reading  
42. to omit words in sentences, such as function words (words that  
43. have little lexical meanings, such as prepositions, pronouns,  
44. conjunctions and articles).

45. Part of the reason why teachers feel the need to focus on  
46. error correction with ESL students is that they are learning a  
47. second language. Therefore, they feel the need to make sure that  
48. they rectify every single error their students make. Teachers  
49. have gone through a long process of education in which  
50. correctness has been emphasized by the colleges and  
51. universities. Consequently, it is easy for teachers to erroneously  
52. follow the same strict rules of academia expected of them by their  
53. professors.

54. Moreover, students who are learning a second language may  
55. go through a silent period, a varying period of time during which

56. a newcomer is unwilling to speak in the second language  
57. (Krashen, 1985). Nearly all students go through a silent period.  
58. This stage could last for as long as one year. English language  
59. learners should not be forced to speak or read until they are  
60. ready to do so. During this time, there is much listening,  
61. comprehension and little output. Many researchers believe that  
62. children are learning the rules of the language during this period.  
63. A teacher may force a child to read and speak in the classroom.  
64. Therefore, teachers should not concern themselves with error  
65. correction at this time. Initially it is best if students explore  
66. language on their own so that they can become familiar and  
67. comfortable at the same time. The effective teacher remembers  
68. the importance of the affective filter (Dulay and Burt). This is a  
69. "wall" a student puts up if his/her anxiety level is high. The lower  
70. the anxiety level, the lower the filter. ESL students must have a  
71. low affective filter in order to learn English, and that includes  
72. reading in the classroom. The more comfortable students are in  
73. their school environment, the more ready they will be to learn.  
74. Overcorrection can be harmful to the natural educational  
75. development of children. ESL teachers should not feel compelled  
76. to correct every error a student makes when he is reading (or  
77. speaking for that matter). Not all errors are worthy of immediate  
78. attention. Not all errors that students make while reading  
79. demand immediate, on-the-spot correction. In fact, it can even  
80. be counterproductive to the ESL student who is reading and to  
81. the other students as well. Yes, error correction in the ESL  
82. reading class is sometimes warranted. The wise teacher,  
83. however, knows how to discern; he/she knows when it is time to  
84. correct and when it is not.

### **A Brief Analysis**

Here, Susan uses the *knowledge-transforming* model. Based on the given topic, she re-establishes the context, shows the purpose of the essay, and offers her own perspective, citing researchers to support her ideas. Once she has accomplished this, the essay flows based on her use of rhetorical devices such

as transitional words (for instance, see lines 35, 47, 51, 54, 60) and her performance of academic tasks such as drawing conclusions, making inferences, and analyzing material. In essence, the student understands that there is a close connection between the content (*what* she has to write) and the rhetoric (*how* she is going to express her ideas). At the beginning she presents herself with a problem, asking how she is going to use the written language to assist her in sharing the ideas she wishes to convey. The result is that Susan re-creates or transforms already existing knowledge into new, expansive knowledge; she uses existing facts and her own inferences to come up with new information that did not exist before.

## **Discussion**

Clearly, the *knowledge-telling* and the *knowledge-transforming* models represent very different approaches to academic discourse, each with its own set of responsibilities and goals. Many of our international students come from educational backgrounds that prepare them only to use the *knowledge-telling* model. Yet many U.S. educators are unaware that this approach dominates the teaching of writing in many cultures. Some have even labelled these students as “deficient and inadequate.” However, in some cultures—China, for example—students are trained to be *receivers* of knowledge, *not* initiators of it. Therefore, students from these cultures have little or no experience creating and expressing novel or personal ideas or thoughts.

Further, many of our Asian students come from educational systems in which they are *not* encouraged to be creative, challenge their teacher or textbook, think critically or “think outside the box”—that is, be innovative. In these systems, teachers tell their students: “Here are the exact pieces of information you need to complete an assignment;” or “Here is what you must know and how you must state the information.” In U.S. colleges and universities, however, the nature of the assignments is radically different. Students do not simply recite given information. Often, a paper requires students to first build or construct a context or frame an issue or set up a situation on their own.

Needless to say, there are marked differences between these two models of writing. Much to the dismay of our college and university teachers, the *knowledge-telling* model has been ingrained in the minds of many of our Asian students. For these students, it may be the only writing model they know or have experienced. Yet in a system that values creativity rather than uniformity, in which re-creation of ideas rather than mere recitation of information is welcome and rewarded on writing assignments and even on comprehensive and qualifying examinations, many of these students fall far short of their educators’ expectations

Below are email communications that I received from two Taiwanese graduate students seeking clarification concerning assignments:

**STUDENT A:**

*Dear Dr. Pratt-Johnson:*

*Thanks for your patient on me. About the assignment you gave in class how can I analyze the reading? What do you want me to do? Do you mean I have to talk exactly what the chapter pages 251-275 say? I can handle that.*

**STUDENT B:**

*Dear Prof. Pratt-Johnson,*

*I am He Li. How are you? I have a question about the presentation of case study. I am in charge of “describe features”, but I am not quite sure what I am supposed to do. I have asked other colleagues, but receiving different answers. I am confused. Is that I describe all the features my student presents in the tape? Could you tell me what I have to present exactly? Thank you so much!*

**STUDENT A’s** inquiry suggests that she is unfamiliar with the academic task word *analyze* or what the process entails. Her last two sentences attempt a sort of end-run around this lack of familiarity: if the assignment is to summarize by recalling facts from the chapter, student C is capable of completing the assignment.

**STUDENT B**, on the other hand, was preparing her part of a group oral presentation. She was to give a detailed account of some of the features of the speech of a person she had interviewed. Completing the assignment would engage the student in re-creating and drawing analogies, yet she is uncertain how to proceed beyond “describing all the features.” In addition, notice how *both* students use the word *exactly* in their emails. It is clear that they were looking to me to tell them precisely what to do—just as teachers in Taiwan customarily do.

**Recommendations**

Clearly, there is a significant mismatch in expectations between U.S. educators and many of our Asian graduate students. Since the difference in writing model mainly accounts for the mismatch, I would be remiss if I did not offer a few recommendations as to how our ESL students can be assisted in transitioning from the *knowledge-telling* model to the *knowledge-transforming* model. I believe that they can be assisted on three levels:

First, since many of our Asian students are required to take ESL courses when they arrive on their college campuses, ESL courses might be used as a forum for students to receive instruction not only in

grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure but also in the *knowledge-transforming* model used for writing in American universities. Perhaps, this challenges university ESL programs to transition from structure-based language instruction to processed-based instruction in spoken and written communication.

Second, our tutoring centers could provide additional support for international students. Staff could be trained and international students instructed through the careful design of written assignments and activities—all in an attempt to enable students to acquire the *knowledge-transforming* model for their university writing. Practice assignments based on students' individual fields of study (be it pharmacy, mathematics, or education) could be given to students to help them through the transition from whatever model they may have been taught to the dominant U.S. model. Students should be taught that in learning another model they are learning another way of experiencing the world, while the *knowledge-transforming* model will be presented not as the “best” or “only” model, but as the model utilized and required in most U.S. schools.

This is not to suggest that university ESL courses and tutoring centers should eliminate assistance in grammar, sentence structure, or diction. As we all know, English learning is progressive and on-going and needs to be continuously cultivated and developed. That having been said, however, a great deal more urgency and weight must also be placed on helping our students acquire academic language, the language that they need in order to succeed. ESL students must be taught how to write effectively, not just correctly.

Moreover, prospective teachers in the United States need to receive specialized training to raise their awareness of the differences in writing models among various cultures. Not realizing that they themselves have been exposed to, influenced by, and acquired a particular writing model, U.S. teachers often do not understand the writing models that Asian and other students bring to the classroom. This, in my view, is unacceptable. All teachers who teach second language learners, irrespective of level, educational setting, or discipline, must understand why second language writers might have difficulty writing in English, even when they demonstrate a good command of grammar and sentence structure. To achieve this goal, teacher education must train teachers, both pre-service and in-service, to be students of cultural differences. As such, they will become more informed and effective educators for all of those who participate in our classrooms.

At the same time, Asian schools should also play an active role in assisting their students to achieve flexibility in their modes of analysis and communication at an earlier stage in their careers. Since many Asian students eventually pursue studies in the United States, exposure to and practice using the *knowledge-transforming* writing model within Asian schools would be time well spent. Even if these students have not thoroughly mastered this writing model upon arrival at U.S. institutions, they



would at least have knowledge of—and hopefully experience using—the writing model that is overwhelmingly preferred by U.S. college and university instructors. The benefits of such exposure will include increased confidence, competence, and success in their U.S. classrooms.

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