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The Discussion Doesn't End Here: The Online Discussion Board as a Reflective Writing Forum

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Chapter 9

THE DISCUSSION DOESN'T END HERE—THE ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARD AS A REFLECTIVE WRITING FORUM

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Pre-reading question: How do you envisage the use of online discussion boards in your own classes if you haven't used them before? If you have, to what extent have they supported students' construction of private and public identities, and power relations among them and with the teacher?

Introduction

Language teacher education programs often bring together radically diverse groups of students with varying needs, skills, passions, life experiences, political views, socioeconomic status, and language backgrounds. In any interaction that takes place in teacher-training courses, there are a number of significant cultural forces just below the surface. These can be hard to understand for students who lack the vocabulary and analytical training to distinguish among the various discourses and practices of the academic and social cultures they encounter (Hyland, 2000; Solsken, Willett, & Wilson-Keenan, 2000). The lines are not neatly drawn, however, between the L1 and L2 speaker groups of English in teacher preparation classes. It is generally hoped that L2 students will contribute to the classroom culture by bringing linguistic and cultural diversity. They can serve as linguistic and cultural resources, but L2 students have frequently reported that

a. they do not have as much to contribute as their L1 peers, and
b. they believe they lack skills that L1 peers possess, as well as the ability to be critical, a skill that seems to come more readily to their L1 counterparts.

Much of the reason for this evaluation, we assume, comes from the quality and quantity of their in-class participation, a term that in recent years has taken on a variety of meanings. Some L2 students also report being unable to keep up with the discussion or to jump in with their opinions, while others are simply not accustomed to being invited to participate at all.

While there has been research on negotiating one's identity as L2 students in graduate mainstream classrooms, which are lecture-based and in which discussions are open-ended, there has been much less research describing negotiation of identities and competencies in TESOL graduate language teacher training environments. Those of us who design curricula with L1 English teachers and L2 English teachers in mind routinely follow those recommendations that, for example, Morita (2004) makes. We use strategies to assist or scaffold L2 students' comprehension of class discussions, attempt to intervene in turn-taking practices and allow students to take turns in an egalitarian manner, and try to employ different kinds of activities and encourage classroom participation (p. 599).

In a well-designed TESOL graduate class, outcomes are multiple and varied enough for teacher learners to "display" their linguistic competence; courses for them are structured creatively;

they are learning how to be teachers and culture researchers in the classroom setting; group roles and positions are structured and carefully considered, not haphazard or random; L2 English teacher learners, either experienced or novice, are considered to be a linguistic and cultural resource; and L1English teacher learners are expected to genuinely understand and engage with the resources immediately available to them. These are just a few pedagogical practices that mirror our expectations for our ESL and EFL teachers. Ultimately, these practices point to the continued need to question the concept of participation (for example, talk is not the only indicator for participation or success), especially since after complying with these practices, we still wonder about our success as second language teacher educators. In the wake of this ideal, there is still research to be conducted on student negotiation in the classroom, as well as more sophisticated notions of participation.

In the last decade there has been a burgeoning literature calling attention to the strengths that L2 English speaking teachers bring to the *teaching* experience (Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Liu, 1999; Medgyes, 2001), but there has been much less on their resourcefulness (or expertise) as *learners* in language teacher education courses, and even less describing their contributions in courses in which the content deals directly with the theory and practice of language and culture. Students typically come to the course prepared to discuss surface manifestations of culture with a capital C (cynically referred to as the 3 Fs: *Food, Fashion, and Festivals)* but are often unprepared to experiment with and experience the underlying culture *of* and *in* the classroom.

One of our goals is to have our students understand culture that extends beyond those visible forms of culture in the classroom setting. In the meantime, there are ample other concepts for L2 English-speaker teachers to consider regarding their cultural "competence," things that L1 English-speaking teachers take for granted. The challenge for them is knowing what kinds of things can be asked about (for example, whether a person's meaning is literal or ironic) and when it is appropriate to ask such things.

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Another goal has been to provide significant experiences so that all class members, including the instructors, are striving to improve their cultural and communicative competence. Non-native English speaking teachers have to cope with language issues as well as classroom expectations that may be quite different from what they are used to. Native English speaking English teachers, on the other hand, may lack the linguistic and cultural competence that their counterparts take for granted, such as knowing the difference between a preposition and a pronoun or knowing about the anxiety that comes with trying to survive in a new (classroom) culture. Since they will eventually be ESL teachers, the native English speakers are on their best behavior when working with non-native English speakers in group-work and on projects and, in general, are genuinely willing to learn from them.

If our goal is to better understand the complexities of classroom participation, it is not sufficient simply to conceive of the classroom as a space for open-ended discussion, where talk (or worse still, "speaking up") is the major criterion for successful participation. Without well-planned structured opportunities for students to interact with one another, along with creative ways to assess those interactions, we will forever suffer the frustration of of what we call academic monopoly and dominance: "He who gets the floor, keeps the floor." By refining and expanding our conception of classroom participation and analyzing its link to culture, we hope to gain some insight to better serve all of our students.

Online Reflective Journals

One obvious, although underreported (Goettsch, 2001), medium for reflection and expression is online journals. These journals can be created in a number of ways, through direct e-mailing from one individual or group to another, the use of e-mail distribution lists, and the kind of electronic forum available for newsgroups. The discussion board feature of Blackboard, the online course software available at our university, has been a useful tool for addressing the various challenges outlined above. In addition to enabling participants to extend discussion beyond the class and explore their responses to the topics raised, it has been an especially helpful medium for students who are less inclined to speak in class. Non-native English speakers often find the discussion board appealing for many of the reasons that Canagarajah (2002) and others have outlined. Speech accent is not an issue. Students who are not usually spontaneous are able to reflect on and craft careful responses to theories and concepts that come up in class, as this quotation shows[1]: "When I was repeating to think the content of our class, I was silent, but I was brainstorming what I want to say. To be honest, there are a lot of terminologies I did not know." This struggle with academic reading in graduate programs should not be a surprise for those of us in this field. More broadly, the shared authority that we try to establish in the classroom, a teaching and learning community of participants who are simultaneously teachers, researchers, and students, spills over into the Blackboard arena. This is evidenced by a Japanese student who has connected one of the course readings to her own speaking style, as a "lesson" for the rest of the students: "In Japan, our conversation style is like bowling game that means individual conversation. I often wait to speak if someone talk because it is impolite to interrupt speaking."

There are, of course, corresponding disadvantages to this form of reflection as well, the most pronounced being that it is a public forum. While on the one hand non-native English speakers have less cause to worry about their pronunciation, they are now nervous about their grammar and writing skills: "This is I am worry about. I hope my spelling is good because I can not image the picture when I am teaching English and I can not spell right. How do my students think about me?" Furthermore, once a written text is produced and sent, it is subject to intense scrutiny, which compels us to ask: How much room is allowed for error, either factual or linguistic, and to what extent do teacher educators have a responsibility to be language and culture teachers and authorities to participants for whom English is a second language? Finally, there is the danger that students will not be as open in their reflections in such a forum as they would be in a traditional journal format, when the audience is generally restricted to the course instructor.

On the other hand, students in our courses have grown up in a world of instant messaging and chat rooms, and thus have a more laissez-faire attitude about "correctness" in this context. Amber, a native English speaker, spelled this out for the group, defining the rules of engagement fairly early in the semester and incidentally taking a philosophical stance about the development of written fluency that we fully endorse:

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1   All excerpts from Blackboard are cited verbatim (including format). Any abbreviations or contextualizations are shown in square brackets. Further, all names are real.

Blackboard discussions are about your thoughts, ideas and opinions. Not how well you can spell or punctuate sentences! The red ink will come on our [papers] so use this forum to relax and communicate freely!

Towards the end of the semester Kim, another native English speaker, joined this position.

I empathize with [non-native English speakers] who want correctness and acceptance. When we consider these two issues, we might think that correctness in language leads to cultural acceptance by others. I don't believe this anymore. Now, a second milestone in intercultural communication, I believe that my cultural acceptance in Columbia, for instance, would come from my personality and self expression, not from using past perfect progressive correctly.

With these concerns in mind, this chapter explores the extent to which the online forum was successful in encouraging students, especially the non-native English speakers in the class, to reflect without letting some representations, primarily those of the native English speakers, dominate (Harklau, 2003). We also hope to show how the reflections in the forum have the capacity to instruct, thereby blurring the boundaries between teacher and student.

To address these issues, we trace themes that emerged from the course topics and were also carried over into the Blackboard reflections. Some of the course topics yielded heartier responses than others. Examples of the topics that produced rich and informative discussions are listed below. The first half of each title in the four vignettes (labeled "lessons I-IV") below reflects the topic of discussion; the second half reflects the "lesson learned"—mostly by the authors.

The data for this chapter come from a course taught two years in succession, a TESOL sociolinguistics course at a small northwest U.S. university. In the first year, five of the participants were Asian (one from Taiwan, another from mainland China, and three from Japan),and five were American. In the second year there were nine students, five Americans and four non-native English speakers (two from Taiwan, one from Korea, and one from Japan). The authors, who team-taught the class, are American and British.

Lesson I: Names and Cultural Identity—Mismatched Expectations

Using Holmes' *Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2001) as our main text, we initiated the Blackboard discussion by introducing the idea of linguistic variation in forms of address, or what we referred to on our Blackboard post as "names." Following Holmes (p. 3), we asked the students to consider names in various contexts. We highlight the following example to demonstrate three ideas. First, we learned early on that we needed to better scaffold our in-class presentations and find ways to help us check for understanding with, especially, the non-native English speakers. Second, the example highlights the sharp contrast between the class discussion and the follow-up blackboard discussion, which, thirdly, reinforces and advances the claim that Asian students are not a monolithic block, a homogenous group whose silence (in the classroom) can only mean one thing (Morita, 2004). Indeed this illustration should reveal textured and differentiated responses that required very little intervention or instigation from the instructors.

As a way to prepare students for their Blackboard discussion, in our first class we presented a short conversation from Scollon and Scollon's (1995) book on intercultural communication in which Mr. Chu, a businessperson from China, and Mr. Richardson, an American businessman, meet

each other on a plane and have a rather awkward conversation, at least from Mr. Chu's perspective (p. 122). We use this conversation to introduce one of the basic frameworks for the course: description, interpretation, and critique. It is not enough, we tell students, to describe something. They need to be able to "cook" their data, and hopefully examine underlying causes for why things happen the way they do. We expected that the Chinese students in the course, for example, would offer one interpretation (taking the side of Mr. Chu—or not), and that the Americans would offer a different perspective.

A number of interesting interpretations emerge from the exchange below. The five Americans in the class weighed in on this discussion with predictable urgency, argument, and zeal—eager, perhaps, to show their understanding of the situation and distance themselves from what they perceive to be Americans' insensitivity to cultural differences. Equally predictably, the Asian students were less polemic and said little during the discussion. Ayako, having been trained in her previous ESL classes (at the same institution) to seek help when she needs it, writes the following:

> I couldn't understand the class that was about name last week. Two businessmen who are Chinese and American talked about their name right? What is the main point of this conversation? Please tell me!!!!!!!!! I need your help.

On one level, embedded in her desperation is Ayako's lack of inhibition in either her English writing or in her ability to admit her lack of knowledge. Since this is the first entry, she has helped set the tone for the rest of the group, and a number of people come to her rescue. On another level the message she sends ("What is the main point of this conversation?"), whether intentional or not, shows her uneasiness with the ambiguity of interpretation, which was one of the points we drew out in the class activity. First to respond is Kim, a seasoned writing teacher and native English speaker, who understands well the frustration ESL writers have. Like most of our students, she takes the program mandate seriously: You are learning to be ESL teachers, so don't overlook non-native English speakers *in your courses*. Thus Kim interprets her classroom position as that of translator and even helper for the course instructors. In fact, Kim was responsible for 20% of all Blackboard postings during the course—almost as much as the authors combined. Her instincts as caregiver and nurturing teacher on Blackboard discussions proved to be beneficial especially for the NNS English teachers.

She opens her entry with a consoling note displaying her empathy (if a bit stilted) for Ayako. Her same educational instincts allow her to offer personal stories and blend those with her academic voice, and that this too can be authoritative.

> Also, I was a little lost because in the evening my brain feels saturated (filled up) with "input," new ideas from helping others with their thinking and from working with students and teachers all day.

Following Kim's entry is James's entry, an even more direct, a concrete minilesson to help the students understand.

> Imagine this situation: Tanoue Yoshifumi speaks very good English, and got his MBA in the US. While a student, he called himself "John" because his friends always mangled his name:

> YOshiFUmi
> YoSHIfumi
> YoshifuMI
> You're shy for me
> etc
> Now, Mr. Tanoue is a businessman. He meets Peter Smith on a plane and gives him his card, saying "Call me John". Mr. Smith reads his card and says: "Great to meet you YoSHIfumi!"
> Questions: How does Mr. Tanoue feel at this point?
> Why did Mr. Smith ignore his invitation to call him John?"

The first response from Ayako shows that she is struggling with what appeared to us to be a straightforward recast of the Scollon and Scollon text.

> I think Yoshifumi felt uncomfortable when Mr. Smith called him john.
> I don't know how American (not only American) chose the name that come from different country. Yoshifumi has different name because he thinks is a good way to suit different culture. Japanese name is difficult pronunciation for American, so he worried about it. Mr. Smith thinks "John" is easier pronunciation than "Yoshifumi." That's why he called Yoshifumi John?

This was Ayako's first course in the program, and she seems to be thinking out loud here as she summarizes what she feels the "main idea" to be, a leftover metacognitive strategy perhaps from her experience in our ESL program. She does, in fact, seem to comprehend at least James' "main idea" in her third sentence, but this contradicts both her first and last claims. One reason for this confusion might be due to the fact that it is less common for Japanese students to change their names than it is for Chinese or Taiwanese students to change their names (not necessarily to accommodate Americans though). Less striking than Ayako's confusion is this identity shift, completely uncharacteristic of her positioning within the classroom the previous week. While explicating a position of confused student, she has simultaneously implicated a position of powerful student who is first to post, not only with a question, but a summary of what she feels the answer to be, which would show a sign of risk taking. By contrast, she could have repeated her plea, "help!!!!," but instead chose to provide a summary. This positioning is certainly at odds with the facile idea that Japanese students are "shy," what we feel to be a rather empty descriptor leftover from some of the literature on learning styles (see, for example, Rao, 2002), although sometimes our Japanese students will use this idea as a way to excuse their lack of participation.

Following Ayako's bid for help, her Japanese colleagues come to her rescue with their own interpretations, again, a very different dynamic from what had happened during the class discussion, in which none of the Japanese students had participated. Without prompting from us, Junko and then Yuko add several more layers to the discussion. First, Junko draws upon her own experience as a non-native English speaker to connect language to Yoshifumi-John's linguistic identity. This is her opening:

> I think Yoshifumi is accustomed to be called "Jhon" only when he speaks English. When he has communication with Americans, he can be near American because I think when people speak different languages, sometimes their behaviors or personalities are different when they

speak their L1. In my case, it is different when I speak English and Japanese. For me, English is better because I can say more my ideas. But Peter didn't call "Jhon" because Peter thought that if he called real name "Yoshifumi" he could be more familiar with Yoshifumi. And also, Peter expected Yoshifumi feels better. I think although Peter ignored Yoshifumi's invitation call "Jhon," Yoshifumi didn't feel bad because Japanese or foreigner's names are difficult to pronounce. Yoshifumi already knew it; therefore he changed his name in America.

Junko has offered her own interpretation, which varies slightly from the one James provided. She links it to Yoshifumi's English speaking identity, an idea which is compatible with thoughts she has around her English-speaking identity, as her third and fourth sentences indicate. She also adds a layer of empathy for the English speaker, in this case, Peter, who botches Yoshifumi's name because she knows, from significant personal experience, that "foreign" names will often be mispronounced. Building on previous classroom discussion, one in which she did not participate orally, she appreciates the intimacy that the American Peter would like. In our classroom discussion and one of Mary's entries about American friendliness, the American participants agreed that Mr. Richardson with his version of cultural sensitivity "didn't get it," mostly because he had not done the requisite work to learn about Chinese names and their significance. Junko, however, is offering an alternative explanation for Mr. Richardson's *qua* Peter's behavior. In other words, the stereotypical American expressions of intimacy with strangers are integral to American culture—we can't help it. Of course, another interpretation, one perhaps less favorable to Americans, might suggest that Yoshifumi, being Japanese, recognizes this American insensitivity, but chooses not to comment.

The irony is not lost on us regarding her rendition of the name "John," either: The spelling and pronunciation of Yoshifumi come quite easily to her of course but John, with its silent consonant, is difficult. (Had she verbalized this idea in class, we would not have seen this idiosyncratic rendition, of course.)

Although not stated explicitly, Yuko disagrees with Junko and sticks closer to the discussion we had in the class.

I think Mr. Tanoue was offended by being called Yoshifumi even though he asked Mr. Smith to call him John. I don't think it is because of his bad pronunciation. As Junko said, "sometimes their behavivores or personalities are different from when they speak L1," I think John is not equal to Yoshifumi when he speaks English. In Japan, business people never call each other in their first names. So, I think it was Yoshifumi's way to approach to another culture that he asked Peter to call him John. Also, it seems like Mr. Smith didn't listen to Yoshifumi. He could take that as he was ignored.

Yuko offers yet another interpretation that extends the conversation even further. First, her mixing of titles merits attention. Whether it is intentional or not, Mr. Tanoue is referred to in three different ways in the first sentence. She feels that Mr. Tanoue (Yoshifumi) was offended, which had nothing to do with Mr. Smith's "bad pronunciation." On the one hand, she appears to understand Mr. Smith and his desire to "express his way of friendliness through his own culture"; on the other hand, he "didn't listen to Yoshifumi. He could take that as he was ignored." Her cultural lesson, like Junko's, is also well noted: "In Japan, business people never call each other in their first names." From Yuko's perspective *both* men are making an attempt, through their cultural lenses, to be helpful.

Lessons Learned

We, the instructors, regularly met to discuss the postings on Blackboard, or would call each other's attention to particular postings or discussions of interest. Our reflections over the *Names* posting brought to light our need to scaffold class activities more carefully to make sure that the non-native English speakers were following, or at least to allow them to check their comprehension in ways that wouldn't embarrass them. This is a recurring concern for teacher educators in our position, as we seek to acclimatize students who are not native English speakers to academic discourse and help them to keep up with fast-moving class discussions, while not painting their language skills in a bad light. Ultimately, however, a course that deals with pragmatics is by definition ambiguous, and misunderstanding is to be expected. In any case, we were both grateful for the safety net that the online reflections provided as, clearly, was Ayako.

The exchange also gave us an insight into the dynamic between the three Japanese speakers in the exchange, none of whom, it should be stressed, offered any opinion in the class discussion. Here Ayako, Junko, and Yuko are perfectly willing to offer (dissenting) opinions, perhaps because this is their area of expertise, thereby dismantling common stereotypes about Japanese students, who are thought to be "harmonious" and "group oriented" (see Kubota, 1999). The issue of why this can happen on Blackboard but not in class is addressed in Lesson IV.

Lesson II: Bafa Bafa—An Intercultural *Mis*communication Simulation: Whose Experience? Whose Content?

One of the exercises in our course is the cross-cultural simulation Bafa Bafa, in which participants learn one of two hypothetical cultures and subsequently interact with each other and then reflect on their interactions and assumptions. We use the simulation to introduce students early on to the idea that there is an emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspective to cultures, discourse communities, and even classrooms. Much of this culture is invisible to the insider, and visible—but irrational—to strangers. After taking part, students used Blackboard to reflect on the experience, saying how they felt about it and what it meant for them as teachers. Bin, our mainland Chinese student, accidentally posted her reflection paper on the site, which evoked a number of responses. Most salient for our purposes here were her candid disclosures regarding her experience "visiting" the Alpha culture simulated in Bafa Bafa:

> My embarrassment and frustration came when I was chosen to go to their place to try to get involved in their culture…. After standing there for a long time, watching what they were doing, I decided to do something, to be nice, open-minded and tolerant. I asked them questions, trying to understand what was going on there and if I could participate. I even tried to touch them in the way they did to each other showing my goodwill. They didn't seem to be happy and no on seemed to have the patience to explain. They went on with their own business, enjoying their own life, totally ignoring me. I felt lonely and hopeless.

Bin has successfully highlighted a key idea from a previous reading. Are tolerance and goodwill enough for cross-cultural understanding (O'Sullivan, 1994)? And, by extension, despite one's intrinsic motivation to learn a language and a culture, are there not other external forces that can prevent one from being accepted in a community? Bin has described her exclusion in spite of her best efforts, and provides us with supporting examples. Bin, a non-native English speaker, who is

generally quiet in class discussions, provides the scaffolding for future reading on this topic. Later in the semester, we introduce students to the work of Norton (1995, 2000) to deconstruct some of their assumptions regarding language learner motivation and acculturation. A learner, in this case Bin, may be extremely motivated to learn the target language and culture, but due to external circumstances beyond her control, may not be allowed to invest in the target language, does not have the tools with which to invest, or may or may not have access to the "wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (Norton, 1995, p. 444). As Pavlenko (2002) points out, "no amount of motivation can counteract racism and discrimination, just as no amount of positive attitude can substitute for access to linguistic resources" (p. 282).

This topic in particular, which incidentally required no translation, intervention, or scaffolding from the instructors, generated a range of interesting responses. Two of the most intriguing aspects of the fifty responses following Bin's post were the genuine conversations and learning that were occurring. Like our classroom discussion, this particular topic elicited very few comments from the non-native English speakers other than Bin, who in fact takes the discussion to a level of critique that we were not anticipating, since there had been few like this from any student in previous years.

Another thread involves Amber and Bin, with Amber recounting one of her earliest experiences of feeling like an outsider in her own country. She writes:

> I was returning from an overseas trip on a packed airplane which was occupied primarily by Chinese people, as well as few Americans. When I landed in Los Angeles, everyone started filing out of the plane and I noticed several of the Chinese people were pushing their way to the front. WELL, the Americans were NOT happy with this (I could tell by their facial expressions and grunts of annoyance), but they were outnumbered. At first, I felt a little annoyed too, but I realized they weren't trying to be rude, it was just their way. So you can imagine when we got to the baggage claim, it was a mess! The Chinese passengers were scrambling to get their suitcases and elbowing, pushing and shoving each other in the process. I stood back and watched … I heard one woman say, "I have never experienced such rudeness in my life." Another guy was visibly pissed off and he let some of the Chinese people know it—but it didn't seem to phase them much. The Chinese passengers weren't trying to be rude; they were just doing what they had been socially conditioned to do AND the Americans were faulting them for exactly that. Both groups had completely different styles of airplane etiquette and neither of them were "wrong" just different. Yet, it was easy to see why the Americans were upset and why the Chinese people thought, "What's the big deal?...Happens all the time." That's what's frustrating—examples like these are just cultural misunderstandings, and if people investigated what's really going on, they wouldn't get so bent out of shape. WHAT'S A PERSON TO DO?

Amber's personal experience is precisely the kind of catalyst one would hope for in order to continue a discussion on intercultural communication. She has taken a rather ordinary event (an airport scene) and has tried to analyze it from the both an outsider's and an insider's perspective. What makes this particularly interesting is the hybrid and paradoxical nature of the exchange, an elaboration of an in-class discussion of emic and etic perspectives. One might ask in a situation like this: Who exactly are the insiders? The Chinese passengers are on 'U.S. turf, acting in Chinese ways,' with the Americans looking on. Amber also characterizes the situation well, and provides a good

model for the rest of the students, when she suggests that neither group was wrong. The discussion doesn't end here, however. Only in our dreams could we have hoped for the following response from Bin.

> Good description Ambre! It makes me homesick! It certainly brings to mind some familiar scenes in some places in my hometown. But is it the culture in China that people behave that way in public spaces? I doubt it. I would rather believe it is a way of survival under unfavorable conditions. If you go to my hometown Shenyang, you will see crowds of people at bus stops along the streets during rush hour. Do they stand in line? Are you kidding? The line would be long enough to cross the street to other blocks!!! Do they elbow and push? Yes! Sometimes they have to push the people in front hard into the bus in order to make enough room to get on. You have to get used to it, otherwise you will never get on the bus.

Bin has expanded Amber's reflection on culture from her own personal experiences better than either of us could have done, since for the most part, although we have extensive international experience, we come from countries that adhere to well-established norms for queuing. With guileless restraint, Bin neither blames nor excuses her fellow compatriots. Instead, she matter-of-factly attributes the behavior in public spaces to "survival under unfavorable conditions." Bin has, in effect, eliminated our need to ultimately ask of the perspective-taking Amber (and others who are reading), "That's great, but why do people do what they do?" That is to say, cultural behaviors come from somewhere—they do not emerge from nothing—and are inevitably linked to real world conditions. Further, given this situation is there such a thing as rude behavior? Better, what is "rude" behavior? Had we asked either of these questions in, say, an open-ended discussion, Bin would quite likely not have volunteered this information and if pressed for a response to the all too familiar query: *Bin, can you tell us about China?*, she would suddenly become elevated as the single representative for all of mainland China (and for some, all of Asia). As it turned out, her apt illustration was not utilized to the extent that it could have been, a point we address below. Next, she concludes her reflections by turning the question of rudeness on its head and, whether intentional or not, has managed to re-create our classroom simulation. When seen through a "foreigner's" eyes (for example, an American with little experience of international travel) LAX can seem fairly uncivilized, at which point one must respond to Bin's questions, which we have highlighted in bold below.

> The airport of Los Angeles is a very crowded place. I had a hard time there waiting there, waiting in line to get out of the airport, trying to find a cart for my bags and trying to find my bags at the right place, wondering all the time where I could re-check my luggage for shipment, where I could find my next plane to Spokane and whether I had enough time to do all this. For people who don't have a lot of international traveling, this is a scary moment. **When you see them pushing and elbowing around, do you feel the need to civilize them or are you able to think in their position?** They are people who are trying to survive in a very foreign country. I would be more grateful to those who answered my questions patiently, showing me the way than to those who tried to civilize me when they found I had done something improper.

Lessons Learned

Part of what makes the above reflections interesting is the fact that we still have access to them. Unstructured, open-ended discussions are often fleeting and can fall flat, leaving the instructor and the students with a sense of incompleteness and no textual reminder of the content. We have learned from our collective years of experience teaching non-native English speakers that most students need time and space to reflect on the material introduced during classroom discussions, and this, as we have pointed out, is one of the attractive features of Blackboard. Since, as the title of this chapter indicates, the discussion doesn't end here, it doesn't need to end with Blackboard either. The student-generated texts are like case studies that can be recycled and used for current and future audiences. Bin's postings for example, while read at least once by everyone, stopped there. Instead of using her rich text as a sort of Freirean problem-posing opportunity, we returned to the course textbooks, privileging the "experts" over what would appear to be the "novices," an idea that contradicts one of major pedagogical tenets: be resources to each other. In other words, the exchange between Amber and Bin should have been treated as course content. As it was, students read their exchange, but there was little or no response: The conversation indeed fell flat. One of the dilemmas, however, of using student texts that are semi private conversations between course members is that they now become public documents. For this reason, we would advise teachers to be intentional about how they use the material. Indeed, as the next section shows, not all (private) discussions should be aired for public viewing.

Lesson III: What's in a Word? A Voice for Moderation?

One of the frustrations of the course for both of us has been the tension between, on the one hand, our espousal of critical pedagogy and the desire to use classroom space as a forum for ideology critique, and on the other, the need to make the course material relevant to a mixed student group. As the courses coincided with the Iraq War, it seemed natural to use language taken from the headlines as material for our discussions of language and power. Early in the semester we set up a forum *What's in a word?*, which cited an editorial critique of the Bush Administration's position in Iraq, followed by a letter in the local paper reacting to the critique. Our intention was to focus on the use of the word *civilize* to describe the US goal in Iraq (as opposed to, say, *democratize*). The editorial, which was very long and filled with idioms and political language, got a response only from two of the three L1 English-speaking males in the course, who quickly ended up "shouting" at each other, their language bristling with self-confidence and peppered with essayist prose:

> I would hope that we try and justify our political actions with some semblance of reasoned logic. If we can't, what's the point? You may see this as a nuance of western politics, but I see it as a requirement for any political action. Sorry, Brandon, relativism rings has always rung hollow in my ears.
> But enough of this heavy-handed bullsh**t. Back to linguistics … …

The last line strikes us as particularly ironic and counter to the message that we have tried to convey in the classroom, that language, and therefore linguistics, is all around us; that it is not neutral, value-free, or abstract. Everything is, therefore, up for grabs. We were both surprised by his separation of very real language from "linguistics."

Less surprising, perhaps, was the lack of participation from the rest of the class, including us. In class, it would have been possible to moderate the discussion and bring in other voices, but in the public online format it became difficult to break into this "fight between the two participants. In addition, we had told students from the outset that Blackboard was *their* forum for discussion and reflection, and that we would read their postings and participate, but that we were not in charge. The motivation behind this, as we have said, was to allow voices other than ours to predominate and to allow participants to explore their thoughts "aloud" so that they would benefit from the review of their peers and not just from the "authority" of their course instructors. In this case, while everyone read the postings,[2] nobody else joined in. Murphy and Coleman (2004) warn that in the context of the online forum "the shift in control away from the instructor is not necessarily a beneficial one but simply a different and possibly more complex and frustrating form of control and domination of communication and interaction" (p. 9). Our action of posting a provocative idea and then withdrawing to the sidelines strikes us as a keen example of this sort of dangerous abdication of authority.

Beyond these considerations, however, was the feeling that the *topic* itself was not engaging the rest of the class. Evidence for this came from our class discussions, in which such topics would frequently engage the native English speakers and leave the non-native English speakers smiling politely or staring into space. It seemed unfair to replicate this dynamic on Blackboard, and so we were more circumspect about such postings after this. For one thing, the editorial on Blackboard had appeared out of the blue as far as the students were concerned. Yes, it was connected to the ideas (euphemism, language, and power) discussed in class, but we failed to highlight this relevance before seeking comment. On the other hand, later class discussions about political correctness, pejorative labels, and national language policies (all of which were also quite heated) were immediately relevant to the non-native English speakers, all of whom had something to say on the topics. The following posting from Sandy (from Taiwan) on language policy exemplifies this:

> Actually, I don't mind to make English the official language in the United States. Because after all, I am just an international student here. However, in my opinion, I think that American is a very lucky country in someway. There aren't a lot of countries that has so many different countries and cultures coming to one country. In America, we can see a lot of immigrations, and that help the Americans to know different countries and cultures. If the Americans see this as a positive point and learn the different cultures, it will be a very great experience for them.
> However, maybe "English only" is not as simple as I seen it.

Lessons Learned

From our own experience and from the literature, we know that the quality of participation changes when instructors take part. In both courses, our postings accounted for about one-fifth of the total postings. Colleagues who use Blackboard but do not post themselves report that not only the quantity but also the quality of postings begins to diminish, with postings becoming increasingly off topic and less well thought out. We believe that if the online forum is to be used to good effect as a reflective writing forum, it needs to be done with careful, but not overbearing, instructor

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2 Or at least accessed them: The Blackboard software tells us in detail who has accessed each posting.

participation and moderation, a point that mirrors our thoughts regarding in-classroom instruction as well.

The language of the initial and subsequent postings about Iraq was hardly inviting to the non-native English speakers in the class, and without the necessary scaffolding to show the relevance of the topic, there was little reason for them to take part. Later attempts, in which we connected the dots a little more carefully, were much more fruitful in generating real inquiry and reflection.

Lesson IV: Sociolinguistic Issues in the Classroom—The Discussion Doesn't End Here

Towards the end of the 2004 course, we began to include on Blackboard a few topics taken from the TESL-L e-mail discussion list. These were real questions about teaching practice from real teachers and were an experiment intended to generate reflection about the kinds of issues that teachers face in their classrooms. They also provided the students an opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge to authentic situations. The first such topic concerned participation, and came from a Korean teacher:

> When teaching the students English conversation or any other sujects, what should I do if the students do not speak and do not show any reaction ? When I ask them even simple questions, they look at me just like a monster. I have no idea if the students are just sitting back and glancing at me without showing any reactions [JJA from South Korea]

First to respond was Carissa, who took a classic educational psychology approach and provided solid classroom-management advice:

> There is a chance that the students are not understanding. In this case, I may take a visual poll by asking all students to raise their hand if they understood the question. If this is the case, the teacher may have to start with even more simple questions.
>
> But, more likely the students are not used to actually speaking English. There are a few things that could be done. The teacher could write a simple question on the board, say it verbally, then ask students to turn to a partner and talk to each other about the question. Talking to a partner is a lot less threatning than talking in front of the class. The teacher can then walk around and get an idea of how students are doing…

Carissa honed in on the cognitive and affective domains, demonstrating her understanding of language acquisition processes, and her answer clearly satisfied everyone else. Almost two weeks went by before the next posting on this topic, which came from Myeong-Seon. By this point we had assumed that the topic was dead, and indeed that our experiment (of introducing these real-life vignettes) had failed. Myeong-Seon's post, however, introduces the important distinction between child and adult English language learner and offers a tantalizing glimpse of unexamined "Korean-ness":

> I don't think that the students didn't understand at all. I'm sure because I am Korean and I'm a that kind of person.[...] If they are adults, the teacher needs to have time to motivate them. I think that it's really hard to make them react. However, if the teacher persuade them how much reaction and participation are important, I believe that their attitude will be changed.

The discussion is joined by JF, whose post indicates that he, like Carissa, is approaching the problem from a classroom management perspective. He has not really understood Myeong-Seon's point that Korean students might not see participation and reaction as important:

> I agree with Carissa that the teacher should clarify that he/she is being understood, but in light of Myeong-Seon's insight I would probably wait a few classes before I asked any one person to speak in complete sentences; rather, ask simple one word answers first to get them used to me before asking for their thoughts.

This prompts Myeong-Seon to be more explicit. She outlines the educational background that leads Korean students to have an expectation of "non-participation" (in the western sense) that is totally at odds with the expectations of many language teachers—and of Myeong-Seon herself, as her questions at the end of the posting indicate:

> It is very common that students don't say anything in a class. Many students would expect that they don't need to talk in a class as they have done in their typical classes.
>   Therefore, many Korean teachers talk without asking anything. They just prepare what they want to teach and say it. Can we change their attitudes? Can we find good ways to communicate with them?

It should be pointed out that Myeong-Seon is one of the quietest students in the class; based on traditional assessments of participation, she would probably not do very well in this course. She is obviously aware of the tension between the expectations of the course and her own behavior as a Korean student, but she has hitherto taken it as a given that something in her needs to be "changed," rather than trying to explore the underlying cultural dynamics. As the course instructors, we spot a "teachable moment" and immediately jump in to answer her questions, summarize the discussion so far, and lead it in the direction we think it should go:

> You have all made excellent points:
> - There needs to be a level of trust between teacher and students
> - There needs to be an atmosphere in which students feel they can say something and not feel foolish.
> - The teacher needs to "scaffold", in other words, to build up to what s/he expects, not just walk in and expect everyone to respond.
> - The teacher needs to pay attention to Korean educational culture, in which students ARE EXPECTED TO sit quietly and passively.
> - The teacher needs to motivate students, not just to talk, but to VIOLATE THEIR OWN NORMS OF BEHAVIOR.
>
> … in THIS culture, students are expected to respond.

The irony of this is that we are talking about some idealized EFL or ESL class, while failing to take our own excellent advice with respect to this graduate class: Myeong-Seon is, in fact, participating very actively in the discussion, and responding appropriately. The fact that she does

not do so in the class discussion may have little to do with "Korean educational culture," about which we know little, and more to do with interpersonal relationships and collectivism, topics in which Myeong-Seon became very interested and decided to research for her final project. The following post shows the onset of this interest, as she compares the behavior of Korean students in the United States and in Korea:

> I think that I can teach Korean students here as I did in ESL class.
> Every circumstances is great to learn..
> They are fully motivated of learning English.
> They don't need to consider other Korean students as much as they did in Korea..
> They don't feel ashamed like in Korea.
> Actually, American teachers are totally different with Korean teachers.
>
> Everything makes them study positively here..
>
> Thesedays, I am wondering about teaching English in Korea...
>
> I also realized that our culture is a shameful culture(?) when we talked about last class..
> It was so much interesting to me....
> I don't have any good answer..but I will find..
> It makes me understand a lot about our culture..

Here Myeong-Seon synthesizes the discussion about participation with the ideas (about shame and guilt cultures) brought up in a class session, during which we remember her saying nothing at all. Her comment that Korean students "don't feel ashamed like in Korea" is interesting since something (beyond her rather low estimation of her own language skills) is preventing her from "saying anything in a class." But having identified what it might be (Korean teachers, Korean classroom behavior, not having to consider other Korean students), she is now faced with a dilemma: Korean students "here" behave differently (and more positively, in her view) from Korean students in Korea. She does not say this, but perhaps an implied question is: How can I apply the training I receive here to a possible future teaching career there?

Finally, her comment that "American teachers are totally different" prompts Lynn, a Taiwanese student, to begin a discussion of error-correction techniques and encouragement, a topic which is of considerable interest to all of the NNS English teachers, who are, in general, skeptical of the student-centered, communicative approach as applied to the EFL situation:

> However, sometimes it still hard for me if students tell the answer wrong again and again... I'll get angry in my heart thinking that how many times we had talked about it...In conclusion, it's a big changing for me to dig deeper in this area, learning the way of teaching and improve myself!

Unfortunately, this topic came up just before the end of the semester, so the discussion did not have a chance to develop fully. However, one month after the course, several students were still posting on this topic, so the discussion obviously didn't end there.

Lessons Learned

First, what Myeong-Seon writes about students not having "to consider other students" goes to the heart of the question of participation, or lack of participation, of non-native English speakers. The imperative not to show off by speaking out in class, thereby showing up one's classmates, is one which takes time and uncomfortable effort to overcome. In contrast, the online forum, removed in space and time from the face-to-face encounter of the classroom, presents an opportunity not just for reflection but for self-expression, engagement, and even disagreement. After this experience, we would never consider teaching a seminar class without it.

Second, as the purpose of the forum is for students to reflect—not for the instructor to feed students information—we should take more time to read and reflect ourselves on what students have written, rather than simply trying to answer their questions. While we wholeheartedly want our teaching to lead to student autonomy, our instinct is to jump in and teach whenever the opportunity presents itself, particularly when a question comes from a a non-native English speaker. Knowing when to do so, and when to hold back and let the discussion and reflection take its course, is largely a matter of knowing the group and the individuals within it, as Tina pointed out:

> Knowing my or anyone elses, metacognitive learning strategies is helpful in recognizing and adopting the strategies that will be most beneficial. I hope that I am able to do this with my students so that I can create a learning environment that benefits everyone.

In any case we can't assume the topic is dead, even if several weeks have gone by without new postings. In fact, many of these topics are ones which students may want to revisit long after the course has finished, so there is probably a case to be made for archiving the discussions and making them permanently available to students.

Conclusions

As a result of participating in and revisiting these reflections, we have come to a more refined understanding of what participation entails, in terms of making information accessible and selecting topics that are of immediate import to the participants, despite our desire to consider alternatives and offer perspectives. We are pleased with the level of participation of the non-native English speakers, who accounted for about 40% of the total postings, and with the opportunity that participation gave them to be experts with their native English speaking peers. We observe a willingness (in some cases a need) for some students to share their understanding of concepts, not simply to verify that they had "got it right" (as we might have predicted) but also to demonstrate their invention, or ownership, of theories they may initially have resisted. In fact, in some ways Blackboard provided a useful alternative for assessing learning outcomes, since we could really see where students were appropriating the ideas presented in the course.

Our study also revealed that on Blackboard students are negotiating and co-constructing meaning together as *both* experts and novices, within topics as well as across them, gaining their expertise not just by reading about cultural and linguistic differences, but by experiencing them. The online forum turns out to be an excellent tool for this, a hybrid participation and reflection forum: Unlike class discussions, the discussion is not in real time and these are not face-to-face conversations, so students can think about their responses in advance. On the other hand, unlike paper journals, they are not polished drafts, and so we often get significant glimpses into what

students are actually learning. Online, the students fall somewhere between speaking in an inner, or private, voice and a public one, and so the rules mediating this type of discussion are not clear cut and may differ significantly from rules mediating classroom discussions and activities (Lantolf, 2000). A final excerpt from Tina exemplifies these points well:

> I reviewed our groups' ongoing Blackboard discussion for the past 5 weeks. It's really interesting. It reveals a lot about how the project unfolded and what role each person played. I also think that I may have learned something about my own autonomy and motivation in reviewing what I've been saying on Blackboard. I think that I'm motivated but I don't know what my level of autonomy is.

Finally, as an unintended consequence of our Blackboard discussions, we as team-teachers have had ongoing opportunities not only to examine our teaching and collaboration, but also to clarify our own positions on some of these critical issues in English teaching, especially as concerns the extent to which our choices of pedagogical approach are applicable to the actual or future teaching situations of our students.

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