

Different Shades of the Collective Way of Thinking: Vietnamese and Chinese International Students' Reflection on Academic Writing

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Investigating ELF/ESL students' experiences in constructing their academic written texts seems to be of great significance in EFL/ESL writing syllabus design and teaching. The case study reported in this paper explores the underlying factors which shape students' ways of supporting ideas in academic essays in English. Drawing on Lillis' (2001) framework for exploring student writing, the study examines the writing experiences of students from Vietnam and mainland China at an Australian university. Based on the students' reflection on their different ways of meaning making, this paper argues for the need to challenge the tendency to essentialize cultural rhetoric patterns and their effects upon Chinese and Vietnamese students' writing in English as a foreign or second language. Several implications for teaching EFL/ESL writing have also been drawn from the findings of this study.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the experiences of Asian students in learning EFL/ESL writing. Entering the new context of higher education in Australian institutions, Chinese and Vietnamese international students may bring with them different interpretations and expectations on writing from their distinctive writing traditions (Cadman, 1997; Connor,

1996; Fox, 1994; McKay, 1993). Beside the expectations shaped by their own educational and cultural settings, most international students may also embrace their personal choices, intentions and concerns in their writing as they are different individual student-writers in the new learning environment.

This study reports a qualitative case study which explores the underlying factors influencing the specific ways of constructing knowledge of Chinese and Vietnamese students in their academic writing in English at an Australian University. The study reveals that on the surface, the students may adopt the collective approach to constructing knowledge, which has been described to be typical in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures (Carson, 1992, cited in Connor, 1997, p. 205; Tran, 1999), in some aspects of their writing. However, under this umbrella of cultural image, their ways of constructing knowledge in light of this norm appear to be complex and different to a certain extent. This indicates that individual students may employ cultural norms in their academic writing in English differently. The findings of this study provide useful insights for EFL/ESL teachers to avoid simplifying the cultural characteristics of Vietnamese and Chinese students' EFL/ESL writing and to respond better to the students' needs in learning EFL/ESL writing.

This paper will first address the aspects related to learners' needs and concerns in EFL/ESL writing. Next, several features of Chinese and Vietnamese writing traditions and the challenges to stereotypes will be discussed. Then, how the talk around texts framework (Lillis, 2001) is adopted to unpack the individual students' personal and cultural aspects around their intentions in writing their own essays will be examined. The data analysis will be mainly concerned with the students' accounts of constructing meaning in specific instances of their writing. The paper concludes with some implications for current pedagogical practices and research into EFL/ESL writing.

LEARNER'S NEEDS, VALUES AND CONCERNS IN EFL/ESL WRITING

Recent research in the teaching of writing has shown great interest in the learners and what their concerns and values are (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002; Benesch, 2001; Leki & Carson, 1997; Pennington et al., 1996; Robinson, 1988; Tarnopolsky, 2000). Learners' needs analysis, in Benesch's view, is expected to include rights analysis and regarding the writing classes, needs analysis is centered on empowering students to be participants in shaping the content or topic for writing and the forms of assessment. Based on the results of Ukrainian EFL learners' needs analysis, Tarnopolsky (2000) states that demotivation in learning writing emerges from the absence of immediate need for acquiring writing skills or the lack of fun in the content of the writing assignments. It is revealed from the study on students' account of ESL writing by Leki and Carson (1997) that there seems to be a need for EAP writing teachers to help students to establish a link between their own knowledge, cultural values as well as their personal needs and the wider social context through the content of source texts.

In a study about an EAP writing course, Basturkmen and Lewis (2002) find little overlap between students' and their teachers' perceptions of success in writing. Similarly, the investigation of Hong Kong students' response to process writing by Pennington et al. (1996) illustrates the complexities of cause-and-effect relationships between teachers' and students' attitudes in the context of an innovation in applying process writing. Even though various studies have been devoted to understanding learners' process and values in EFL/ESL writing classrooms, little focus is given on uncovering their intentions, logics and concerns in constructing particular academic essays by involving individual learners themselves to reflect on their experiences of writing these texts. This study is an attempt to gain insights into this silent aspect of EFL/ESL writing pedagogy practices and research.

DISTINCTIVE WRITING TRADITIONS

International students' academic writing in Western institutions may be marked by particular interpretations of meaning making. Their different interpretations of the approaches to writing are formed by a host of factors including the ways they have learnt to see the world, the ways of valuing and constructing knowledge, the ways of communicating with the audience and organizing discourse (Cadman, 1997; Connor, 1996; Fox, 1994; McKay, 1993). According to Fox (1994), international students are bound to different ways of seeing the world and this is inherent in their cultural assumptions and communication norms. In the same vein, Ryan (2000) recognizes that as international students come from different cultures, they are in favour of different cognition and learning styles. From this perspective, it can be seen that international students have been brought up with particular ways of interpreting and describing the world and of reflecting these in their writing. There are, therefore, particular approaches to knowledge in different cultures which have impact on international students' interpretations of the ways to construct an argument in writing in Western higher education.

Fox (1994) acknowledges that since different ways of making sense of the world and different approaches to knowledge exist in different distinct writing communities, approaches to meaning making in academic writing which are considered logical appear to be different in different cultures. Therefore, analytical, descriptive or reproductive approaches should be viewed as different logical ways of making sense of the world and different logical ways of making meaning in writing in different cultures. International students may appear to adopt descriptive rather than analytic approach to learning (Ryan, 2000). According to Ballard and Clanchy (1991), Western style seems to be favour of analysis and interpretation and Asian style seems to be favor of reproduction. In fact, reproduction style or descriptive style, which is formed by what counts as knowledge and thus what is expected from students' academic writing in some intellectual traditions, is often viewed as a negative writing style in the Western institutional context.

However, these distinctive approaches to writing, which are largely shaped by distinctive cultural and social communities, may be differently reproduced in contested and changing discourses.

Chinese rhetorical practices seem to be marked by an indirectness tendency, politeness norm and respect for the reader and the preference for being uncritical in writing (Hinkel, 1997, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). In light of the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist assumptions, it is the very act of writing the text that enables the writer to be credited with authority and knowledge and therefore, there is little need for the writer to make an effort in explaining the content, convincing the audience or “prove to be knowledgeable” (Hinkel, 1999, p. 92). The moral ideology underlying Chinese schooling practice where the teacher is considered to be both the moral example and the provider of knowledge has helped to form Chinese rhetorical feature of being implicit in academic writing (Barker, 2002; Hinds, 1987; Mao-jin, 2001). As the master of knowledge, the teacher is thought to know clearly what his/her student means in writing. Therefore, the need to provide detailed explanation or persuasion in academic writing where the teacher is often the only audience of the written text seems unnecessary. The relationship between the writer and reader in Chinese writing is also bound to the politeness norm regarding ‘face’ value and solidarity in Chinese culture (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

The cultural attitude towards the teacher as the authority of knowledge and moral example also leads to Chinese writing style which tends to accept knowledge uncritically and avoid questioning knowledge provided by the teacher (Hinkel, 1999). Moreover, the uncritical attitude towards knowledge in the textbook may reflect the people’s respect for the wisdom of the past as their ‘spiritual’ value and strength. What is printed may be reinforced and preserved by centuries as “classical works” (Barker, 2002, p. 181). Chinese traditional approach to building knowledge in favour of the order in which learning (xue) comes first and questioning or thinking (si) comes second (Barker, 2002) may result in Chinese students’ hesitation to express their own thinking or pretending to be uncritical while learning. Carson (1992, cited in

Connor, 1997, p. 205) elaborates that the moral principles embedded in social values and ideologies such as ‘patriotism, the collective good, group loyalty, and respect for authority’ shape the ways students learn writing and reading. As a result, in her opinion, Chinese language or Chinese writing in particular is not oriented to be employed as a means of expressing individual meaning by Chinese educational ideologies and collective value.

Vietnamese writing seems to be characterized by the tendency to maintain harmony in idea expression (Ferguson, 1997; Phan, 2001; Tran, 1999). Vietnam is also influenced by Confucian ideology (Nguyen, 1989; Tran, 1999). Thus, similar to Chinese culture, Vietnamese cultural values with regard to respect for knowledge in the textbooks and for teachers’ ideas have led to the tendency to show appreciation and respect for others’ ideas. The way harmony is preferred in Vietnamese ideology in building knowledge and in writing is also embedded in Vietnamese socio-economic feature. Vietnam is an agriculture-based society (Tran, 1999) and people’s life and well-being are much dependent on nature. Traditionally, due to the awareness of the significance of nature to people’s survival, the harmony and stability in the relationship between human beings and neighborhood or nature have been always highly valued. The factors may be intimately interwoven with one another and together they help to form such shades of the effort to maintain harmony as circularity or indirectness and avoiding disagreement or questioning in approach to knowledge and writing (Phan, 2001).

More importantly, Vietnamese students may be to some extent affected by the Vietnamese communal value (Tran, 1999), a sense of community growing up from the 4000 year old agricultural civilization. One of the essential spirits of this communal approach is that individual needs, benefits and ideas are a part of and should be in line with the communal needs, benefits and ideas. This is partially related to the significance to safeguard human relationship in communal life where individual welfare is so dependent on each other’s welfare and the whole community’s welfare. This collective way of thinking and seeing the world may lead to the practice that the strength of a certain idea lies in how the community values and thinks

about it.

CHALLENGES TO THE STEREOTYPES

While Chinese and Vietnamese writing features tend to be diverse, wide-ranging and multi-layer, the above brief description is just an attempt to highlight some of the remarkable writing norms rather than provide an overview of the Chinese and Vietnamese writing traditions. A growing line of literature however indicates the need to challenge the commonly-held assumptions about Asian learning styles, including the approaches to meaning making of Chinese learners and Vietnamese learners (Biggs, 1991; Kember & Gow, 1990, cited in McClure, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Watkins, 1996). Although a large part of the literature establishes that Chinese writing is marked by indirectness, by reference to contemporary Chinese textbooks, Wang and Yang (1988; cited in Kirkpatrick, 1997, p. 144) claim that three out of four common ways to begin a Chinese composition tend to advocate a direct or linear approach. Kirkpatrick (1997) further highlights that the common techniques to end a Chinese composition tend to be succinct rather than circular or indirect.

In his discussion of the controversies in second language writing, Casanave (2004, p. 5) highlights “the dangers of cultural stereotyping and the textual, as opposed to social, focus of the field.” Questioning the legitimacy of traditional contrastive rhetoric, Kubota and Lehner (2004), for example, offer an alternative conceptual framework called critical contrastive rhetoric. This approach aims to locate student writing in the web of power relations, discursive construction of knowledge, rhetoric and cultural values while problematizing the essentialism tendency of traditional contrastive rhetoric (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). Also, the need to integrate the issues of gender, class and race into studies about second language writing is also recently addressed by Kubota (2003).

It has been argued that writing norms themselves are shaped by culture and

culture is not a 'set' or 'fixed' construct (Stephens, 1997). In a study which examines the diversity of Chinese attitudes towards academic study, Stephens (1997) provides justification for the need to see culture as a 'contested area of discourse' or cultural-situated features as variable and shifting bound to social, historical and political circumstances rather than cultural description. He argues against the tendency to resorting to some oversimplifications of the culture-based writing styles for the interpretations of students' writing practices. It is inadequate to just rely on the assumption that all students who come from the same group of culture adopt the same distinctive cultural writing approach (Fox, 1994). Thus, both Stephens (1997) and Fox (1994) share the view that it is necessary to consider the personal experiences and perceptions of students when investigating writing.

The above argument reveals that although trends in Vietnamese and Chinese writing traditions need to be acknowledged, placing too much emphasis on them as the only explanation for students' writing experience may easily lead to stereotyping. Rather, in light of Littlewood's (1999, p. 83) suggestion, cultural assumptions should be viewed as "possible clues" for our interpretations of students' particular ways of writing. This argues for the need to recognize possible variations in terms of writing amongst individual students from the same or similar writing tradition and thus look at particular texts by individual students from the perspectives not only of the teachers relative to these students and of the researcher, but importantly of the students themselves, which are partially mediated by their personal beliefs, values and subject positions. In other words, this view recognizes the significance of listening to students talking about their own texts, which is at the centre of Lillis' (2001) framework. This framework informs the data collection and data analysis of this study and will be discussed in the section below.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Lillis' (2001) model has been adopted to explore students' perceptions on

their own writing in this study. Each student participant was invited to an one-hour interview in which he/she was asked to talk about his/her selected text. The talk aims to engage students in an exploration of their experiences of writing these texts and the underlying factors which shape their specific ways of writing. Lillis' (2001) heuristic draws on the critical discourse analysis theory introduced by Fairclough (1992). This framework is centred on three sets of questions to help students unpack their writing: What can you say/what do you want to say; How can you say it/How do you want to say it; Who can you be/who do you want to be. In this study, rather than the 'who' questions, the 'how' and 'what' questions have been more focused and the 'why' questions has been added. This aims to understand students' negotiation of different interpretations of academic writing through what/how they think they are required to write and what/how they desire to write. The 'why' question (Why do you want to write so/Why can you write so) in turn helps to unpack the underlying factors influencing why students wrote in a certain way as revealed through their texts. Through *the talk around text*, students' experiences in academic writing academic writing were revealed through their reflection on what/how/why they wrote specific parts of their texts. Lillis' framework aims to bring to the fore the student writers' intentions and potential choices in constructing their own texts and thus may offer deeper understandings about how they negotiate different interpretations and values of academic writing.

This paper focuses on the preliminary data which was collected from three students using a modified version of Lillis' (2001) framework. The talks were with one Vietnamese student, Xuan and two Chinese students, Lin and Wang, who were enrolled in a Master of TESOL at an Australian university. All these students did their Bachelor's degree in EFL in their home countries and met the cut-off IELTS score of 7 in order to gain entry to the Australian university where this study was conducted. The texts these students talked about were the first assignments for the first subjects - second language development, of their Master course. For this subject, the students were given the opportunity to choose and write an essay about 2,500 words in length on

one of the factors such as input, age, motivation or formal instruction, which influences second language acquisition. Xuan's text was about the relationship between age and second language acquisition. Wang decided to work on the topic: 'How input influences second language acquisition' while Lin chose the topic about the role of motivation on second language acquisition.

The work reported in this paper is part of a larger research project being carried out with students from China and Vietnam in different disciplines at an Australian university. Different aspects of cultures and prior literacy practices, which Chinese and Vietnamese students bring into their experiences of writing at the Australian university, emerge from the study. However, within the limited scope of this paper, I just focus on the students' reflection on the specific instances of meaning making their written work, which are related to the collective approach to thinking.

VIETNAMESE AND CHINESE STUDENTS AND COLLECTIVE WAY OF THINKING

This section is going to discuss how Xuan, the Vietnamese student, and Wang and Lin, the Chinese students, attempted to construct knowledge and develop arguments in writing their first texts for their TESOL course. It does not aim to analyze linguistic features of these texts. Rather, it focuses on the students' reflection on their intentions underlying their ways of meaning making in specific instances of their texts. The students' experiences indicate that on the surface, these Chinese and Vietnamese students appear to be influenced by their cultural group-oriented approach to knowledge in their academic writing in English. However, at a fine-grained level, their actual ways of adopting and mediating their cultural norm of writing are to some extent dissimilar. Their differences partly depend on their personal views and previous experiences in writing. This indicates the need to unpack the complexities underpinning what has been taken for granted as cultural ways

of writing and how they may shape students' EFL/ESL writing and learning.

Xuan seemed to adopt collective approach (Tran, 1999) to building knowledge and to supporting her arguments. The following extract is one of the paragraphs from her first text for her course. She ended this paragraph with a quotation from a famous author in the field of second language acquisition:

The critical period hypothesis is associated with the name of a biologist, Eric Lenneberg (1925-76). The critical period refers to a specific period of time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning. Based on his studies on human biology and neurology, he concluded that there is "an age limitation of language acquisition" (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 142). According to him, this critical period exist from the age of two to around puberty. He explained:

After puberty, the ability for self-organization and adjustment to the physiological demands of verbal behavior quickly declines. The brain behaves as if it has become set in its way and primary, basic language skills not acquired by that time (Lenneberg, 1967, p. 158).

His hypothesis concerns primarily with first language acquisition. However, he also investigated into the field of second language acquisition. "Most individuals of average intelligence are able to learn a second language after the beginning of their second decade, although the incidence of "language-learning-blocks" rapidly increases after puberty. Also automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after this age, and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and laboured effort. Foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty." (Lenneberg, 1967). According to his view, children in the critical period acquire second language automatically because during that period their brain structures are specialized for language learning. After this period, when the brain becomes 'set', "older learners tend to employ their learning abilities and strategies to learn a second language — the same abilities they would use to learn other skills or information" (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

In the above instance of writing, rather than using a concluding sentence,

Xuan ended her paragraph with a quotation or the idea from a famous author or an expert in the area of language and language acquisition. In our talk around the text, Xuan accounted for her above way of writing: “This is just like in the conclusion I just want to put someone's saying just to make the conclusion stronger, like that is what you think and then there is someone else also thinks that”. She believed that this made her argument more convincing because this meant that not only she but others, especially the experts in the area, also think in the same way. She thus did not appear to accommodate the conventional Western paragraph structure but tend to build up the paragraph in the way she was familiar with in her previous schooling. Xuan linked her above instance of writing to her Vietnamese way of writing: “I remember, they [Vietnamese people] put the quotations right at the beginning and they also put a quotation at the end. Yeah, and I also did that, I sometimes put the quotation at the end and that makes the conclusion stronger because not only me think that but other people also think as I think.” Xuan revealed that this way of writing was shaped by her previous experience of writing, in which the strength of the argument lied in the way the community think and value. Tran (1999) characterizes this to be the communal approach to making sense of the world, which is typical in Vietnamese culture. In this case, Xuan tended to bring along her voice as experience (Lillis, 2001, p. 46), which was embedded in her prior literacy background into her academic writing in English at an Australian university. In other words, she seemed to draw on the intellectual resource from her previous schooling and her Vietnamese culturally situated approach to knowledge in order to empower herself in academic writing in English.

Unlike Xuan, Wang was influenced by the communal approach to meaning making in a different way. According to her, she tended to hesitate in critically evaluating the experts’ research in her first text at the Australian university since she was shaped by her Chinese group-oriented logic of thinking. The following passage from Wang’s text illustrated how she attempted to comment on the related literature:

Behaviourist model views second language acquisition as habit formation and they propose a direct relationship between input and output. Learners, after receiving input, imitate what they hear, and produce the output, then, either receive positive reinforcement or correction as feedback depending on whether they produce target language correctly or not. Ellis (1994) asserts that behaviourists emphasize the possibility of shaping L2 acquisition by manipulating the input to provide appropriate stimuli and by ensuring that adequate feedback is always available. Behaviourists view input as stimuli and feedback. They put more emphasis on the role of habit formation rather than input in second language acquisition. Ellis also points out behaviourists ignores the internal processing that takes place inside the learner. From their point of view, acquisition is controlled by external factors and learner is viewed as passive medium, which we now perceive that it is not the case.

In elaborating on how she has evaluated the research on how input influences second language acquisition in her essay, Wang explained, “Actually I am not that confident because I am still in the stage of accepting other people's ideas... At that time I am not that critical, I mean I just repeat other people's words and I can't really give my own understanding.” She revealed that she was not confident enough to be critical of the researchers' work because she had been socialized into the practice of unquestioning others' opinions. It seemed that background experience was powerful in affecting Wang's current way of writing in her course. She linked this practice to her Chinese cultural pattern of thinking: “This is very common and also Chinese way of thinking is the collective way of thinking. That means I should think as other people think... I just anticipated this sort of context for so many years.” What Wang refers to as her unconfidence and hesitation to critical thinking reflects the collective ideology of constructing knowledge valued in Chinese culture (Carson, 1992, cited in Connor, 1997). That is, knowledge tends to be built up in a communal way with the efforts from the community members to avoid tension in communication. Being shaped by this collective spirit, Wang's earlier way of developing arguments is thus tied to her attempt to avoid the tension in writing by accepting others'

views rather than criticizing them.

It would appear from her account that Wang's effort to respond to the disciplinary requirements in writing her first text is complex and multifaceted. She was determined to change to the new way of writing expected in the academic context in Australia. That is, she preferred accommodating when confronted with the academic demand of her discipline in terms of critical thinking. She, however, lacked the ability to do so since she has not been familiarized with this way of constructing the arguments before and at the same time she was still shaped by her Chinese communal approach to knowledge and her own admiration for the experts' ideas and writing. Both Wang and Xuan were influenced by the group-oriented or the collective approach to representing knowledge in writing their argumentative essays but it seemed interesting that they reflected this framework in their writing in different ways. One adopted the communal ideology in relation with the use of quotation to support her ideas through drawing strength on what the group believed: other people also think as I think. Whereas, another was shaped by its spirit and endeavor to maintain harmony in writing by accepting others' views rather than challenging them: I should think as other people think.

When discussing how to support her arguments in her academic writing in Australia, Lin stated that she often depended on other researchers' findings in books and their opinions rather than her own source about Chinese EFL situation (she used to be an English-major student in China). The reason underpinning her way of employing evidences to construct arguments was also related to the collective approach to representing knowledge. The following excerpt from her written text illustrated how she used Dörnyei's ideas to support her ideas about the limited aspects of Gardner's research:

Therefore, from above it is not difficult to perceive that all the studies leading Gardner and his associates to prove the dominant importance of integrative motivation in SL learning tend to be in a SL context rather than a FL context. "Although it was partly inspired by an interest in the interrelationship of the Anglophone & Francophone communities in Canada, Gardner's actual motivation theory does not address the

complexities of this relationship and neither does it concern the varying social influences that can be found in different parts of Canada” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 68). Even his Philippines case cannot serve as an epitome of other Asian countries as he expected. As a matter of fact, the researcher himself noticed the possible difference in motivation within different contexts, which can be indicated in his own analysis of the research findings of both the U.S. and the Philippines examples. However, for some reason further research to try out other more typical contexts for more types of motivational factors was not carried out, and the assertion that integrative motivation outweighs instrumental motivation in SLA remains consistent and unchanged.

Lin reflected on her intention underlying her way of writing:

This comment from Dörnyei can also support my view about Gardner’s choice in the context of his research. Dörnyei said Gardner’s purpose is to reflect the interrelationship or complexity of this Canadian community but actually what he did does not address those complexities... Also it can support my idea that not only me that has doubt on Gardner, but there are many other researchers who have done quite scientific research on it [motivation] and their research findings show the same result.

Lin also accounted for her frequent use of Dörnyei’s direct quotation to support her idea:

Sometimes I use the quotation, some sentences are really fascinating me. It’s very concise and it expresses what I think in a very good way and I use it and sometimes since I have to use another sentence in a similar meaning, it’s better for me to use the author who is a native speaker and whose sentence structure and whose word choice I think will be better than mine. And I think it’s easier for me, I do not have to think of another kind of way; maybe I’m inferior to him and still I have to spend time thinking of it. That’s why.

In the above extract, Lin used Dörnyei’s quotation to make her argument stronger even though she did not tend to paraphrase it or articulate on how

that quotation helped to further her idea. Lin clarified in her account of writing this passage that the use of Dörnyei's idea helped to show that not only she herself but the other researcher, who was experienced in the area, was also doubtful of Gardner's finding. As a result, her argument appeared to be more convincing. Like Xuan, the Vietnamese student, Lin therefore seemed to be influenced by the communal value where the strength of argument was believed to lie in how the majority thought about it in the same way. Lin also positioned herself as being inferior to the researchers, for instance Dörnyei, in terms of disciplinary knowledge as well as language use and meaning expression. She pointed out that the author had the authority of an expert in the field and of a native speaker, so it was more sensible for her to directly quote the researcher's words rather than paraphrasing them in a way she believed to be possibly not as good as his. Her view with regard to the use of evidence in essay writing indicated that she appeared to rely on the direct quotations from the experts as she assumed that this enabled her to be in a more favourable position in terms of supporting her arguments.

Both Lin and Xuan appeared to adhere to the communal value in adopting the evidences to support their ideas through the use of direct quotations from the experts in the related area because they believed that these sources of evidences added weights to their arguments. However, the underlying factors which helped to shape their belief might not be completely similar. Xuan seemed to attribute this way of writing to her past habit of writing in Vietnamese. Yet, Lin argued that her way of using direct quotations from the experts in the area appeared to arise from her personal view of what was considered sophisticated writing. Also, even though Lin and Wang are from the same culture, their ways of meaning making in their essays reflected different aspects of the collective way of thinking.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the students in this study to a certain degree tend to be shaped by

the collective approach to constructing knowledge, which is often viewed to be a distinctive feature of Chinese and Vietnamese cultures (Carson, 1992, cited in Connor, 1997, p. 205; Tran, 1999), the ways they actually mediate this rhetoric pattern in their academic writing in English may vary somewhat. In the case of Xuan and Lin, their way of employing evidences to support arguments indicates that they are not merely influenced by the cultural norm but have different intentions in their ways of adopting it in their academic writing in English. The findings show that their accounts in meaning making are complex due to their differences regarding their personal views and personal agency in constructing knowledge in written discourse. The students' intentions and beliefs underlying their specific ways of writing revealed in their talk around texts question the tendency to simplify as well as essentialize cultural Chinese or Vietnamese rhetoric patterns and their effects upon students' writing in English as a foreign or second language. The students' experiences in this study links to what Kubota and Lehner (2005) suggest as the need to "move beyond merely discovering, describing, and thus perpetuating cultural differences as given" (p. 138). The discussion above indicates that cultural label such as the communal approach to knowledge might be differently reproduced in EFL/ESL discourses by individual students. The students' accounts in this study show that there seems to be different shades of the collective approach to thinking possibly employed by Chinese and Vietnamese students and thus disparity exists under that commonly used term.

In particular, several implications for teaching EFL/ESL writing could be drawn from the findings of this study. There seems to be a need to increase our understandings of the ways EFL/ESL students may be influenced and may negotiate cultural knowledge in their EFL/ESL writing. The talk around text model adopted in this study provides insights into individual students' values, intentions and views embedded in how they may produce and reproduce their cultural norm in EFL/ESL writing. Most often, the students' visible signs or visible needs mainly shaped by institutional requirements and social expectations have been taken into account in EFL/ESL writing

syllabus design. What is deep inside students' act of writing in a foreign language involving their own cognitive and affective factors embedded in their seemingly unrecognized needs or invisible needs remains largely unexplored. The study also supports the argument by Kubota and Lehner (2005) about the significance to explore the ways to raise the critical awareness of teachers and students about the complexities under the umbrella of what is often portrayed as taken-for-granted cultural patterns.

The study reported in this paper is small in scope, so its findings should not be generalized. In particular, it involves three Masters Vietnamese and Chinese students at an Australian University. Hence, the context and institutional structure this study is concerned with may be different from those of various institutions in Asian countries. It would be useful to conduct case study of individual students about their attempts to construct particular academic essays in EFL/ESL at different levels in various institutions in particular Asian countries. It would also be interesting to get the teachers' comments on students' texts and compare them with the students' views of their own writing. Such studies would help teachers and institutions make well-informed decisions about appropriate pedagogy for teaching EFL/ESL writing.

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