WRITING AND CULTURAL IDENTITY (RE)NEGOTIATION

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ABSTRACT

Always a complex task, writing is especially challenging for ESL/EFL learners. The process of finding a new, culturally appropriate voice takes its emotional toll that is often glossed over in SLA literature or overlooked in writing classes. This article describes a pilot study designed to explore the affective domain of Qatari students’ experience of writing in English. Discussion of the findings emphasizes implications for classroom practice.

Key words: bilingualism, culture, perception, affect, voice

1. Introduction

In the age of transnational education, students in many regions of the world attend branch institutions of North American universities. This exciting educational opportunity brings with it many challenges. Even the most instrumental view of a language cannot separate it completely from its culture. Not surprisingly, to succeed in a college that offers a Western style curriculum, young people must have not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural knowledge and intercultural communication skills. While this need is commonly acknowledged, designing a curriculum that would help meet it is by no means easy. Another question that is seldom addressed is the impact that living in linguistic and cultural borderlands has on students.

As revealed in numerous memoirs by bilingual writers depicting their struggle, the difficulty of finding one’s voice, in the sense of identity and presence (Elbow, 2007), is especially noticeable when one writes in a second language (L2). At the same time, used as an instrument of reflection and self-discovery, writing can also be the best tool in confronting issues related to acculturation. Hence in the context of writing instruction the issue of the emotional aspect of L2 identity formation is by no means trivial. While the literature on L2 writing pedagogy is extensive, not enough is known about the actual experience of individual learners, especially those from non-Western cultures. This is definitely true in the case of Arab students in the Gulf.

In Qatar, English is de facto the lingua franca. Most citizens regard this as a positive development and focus on the benefits of additive bilingualism. Even those who see Westernization as a threat or lament deterioration of Arabic language skills and loss of cultural heritage accept the presence of English in everyday life as inevitable. However, the stakes are higher in Education City, the
campus hosting five branch institutions of Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas A&M, Carnegie Mellon University, Northwestern University, and Virginia Commonwealth University. In these schools the language of instruction and curricula are the same as on their respective main campuses in North America. Thus the issue is no longer using English just to transact business or consume products of Western culture, but adapting to a new way of thinking and renegotiating one’s identity. Regardless of whether it is recognized or acknowledged, this project begins on the first day of classes. In assessing their successes and failures, Education City educators frequently focus on the issue of standards, curriculum modification and graduation rates. More often than not, the affective domain of their students’ experience is overlooked. Hence the need for more studies. The pilot project described here presents an attempt to take a closer look at the experience of students at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar (WCMC-Q).

2. Study

2.1. Goal of the study

The goal of the study was to explore the affective domain of Arab students’ experience and their perceptions of themselves as writers in English. The focus on emotions should not come as a surprise. Recent research in fields such as psycholinguistics, neuro-linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and SLA (Second Language Acquisition) has increased awareness of the importance of affect in the process of teaching and learning. In the case of medical students in Qatar, ability to read, interpret and express emotions across a variety of cultures is obviously a crucial part of their professional development, no less important than their linguistic and cultural proficiency.

2.2 Methodology

This pilot study used a combination of a qualitative and quantitative approach. It was conducted over the period of three years. In total, 41 first-year premedical students at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar participated in the study. The students’ English proficiency levels ranged from near native to intermediate, but the majority of the cohort was at the high intermediate/low-advanced level. The study had four phases incorporated into the first year writing seminar curriculum; the data was collected from a survey, an in-class writing task, semi-formal interviews, and a personal essay.

In the first week of the semester the students were asked to complete a survey that aimed at exploring their understanding of bilingualism and biculturalism as well as their perceptions of themselves as writers in L2. A summary of the survey was shared with the students, who then read and responded to Fan Shen’s (1989) seminal article “The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition,” in which the author addresses the cultural and ideological determination of the self and emphasizes the need to develop a new identity in the target culture.

The next phase of the project began in Week 2 with a twenty-minute task which involved asking the students to describe what the process of writing in English
felt like to them. The time limit was supposed to encourage a spontaneous response. The students were assured that the assignment would not be graded and would not be publicly attributed to them without their permission. The individual responses were collected, anonymized, and discussed in class.

In the course of the next two weeks the students discussed their perspective on the issue of bilingualism and emotions in semi-structured interviews with the instructor. They revisited their response to the question asked in week 2 and used it as a prompt for identifying their specific problems and goals for the semester. The module ended in week 4 with a personal essay in which the students were asked to address the issue of the socio-cultural boundaries of the self. Although the prompt did not refer specifically to the affective aspect of writing as a bilingual, 91% of students chose to center their essays on this issue.

**Findings and Discussion**

The results of the survey confirmed the instructor’s observations and anecdotal evidence regarding Arab students’ view of the importance of English. All the participants in the survey identified themselves as bilinguals and saw bilingualism as beneficial. Enumerating the advantages of being bilingual that they listed included communication (80%), access to knowledge and information (15%), and a better quality of life due to business opportunities and more confidence (5%). Asked to elaborate on their understanding of biculturalism, 85% of the respondents stated that being bilingual does not mean being bicultural. Again, most of the participants (95%) regarded bi-culturalism as beneficial. However, only 37%, none of them are Qatari students, saw themselves as bi-cultural.

As predicted, the students were well aware of the main reasons why writing in a second/foreign language is always difficult. They agreed that much could get lost in translation because some words or concepts have no equivalents in another language. Surprisingly, although 35% claimed they knew such a word or concept, only 10% could give a specific example.

In answer to the question “Is it easier for you to have an informed/academic discussion in English or Arabic?” 38% of the respondents said it was easier in Arabic, 31% found it easier to do it in English, and 31% saw no difference. At the same time, asked if it was easier for them to interpret and express emotions in L1 or L2, 45% said it was easier in their mother tongue, 36% said it was easier in English and 18% did not see any difference when switching between the two languages. These findings were corroborated in the semi-structured interviews that followed the survey.

The writing prompt administered in week 3 yielded interesting results. The students responded to the task with enthusiasm and creativity, in most cases using metaphors to describe their emotions, a preferred way of expression in Arabic. Not surprisingly, they drew most of their images from Nature, mainly depicting ocean scenery, but a few also picturing a forest, a desert plant, an animal, a cave, or a rock. In addition, they used some images related to other arts.
The two main themes that emerged from the data pertained to the students’ perceptions of their Arabic and English selves and the matter of agency.

Reflecting on writing in English and Arabic, the students commented on having a different voice in their mother tongue and in the second language, and admitted that they could be in conflict. One student pictured her Arab self and English selves walking at a distance and observing each other critically. The student saying, “Sometimes I get stuck and have to consult my original Arab self to complete my piece by adding flavors in” spoke for all those who realize their L2 voices can be perceived as bland and devoid of the richness of their authentic personalities. In many cases the respondents expressed frustration at being unable to convey complex ideas and emotions with any sophistication.

Overall, one can say that the findings reflect Arab youth’s struggle with the issue of cultural identity. While they are eager to benefit from globalization and Westernization, Qataris, like other people in the region, are also afraid of losing their heritage and uniqueness. The influx of foreigners, pervasive presence of the Western media and impact of social networking are becoming a source of unease that is only occasionally discussed in the public forum. The anxiety felt by the students in question is compounded by their frustration of not having complete mastery over their voice when writing in English.

At the same time, while some students focused on difficulties of writing in L2, several admitted that it is easier for them to express emotions in English, since they are not used to doing it in their mother tongue or because it allows them to explore topics and aspects of their personality that are usually hidden or ignored. The following table gives examples illustrating the range of feelings revealed by the students’ comments with respect to their sense of agency:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Examples of metaphors used in response to the prompt in Week 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of no control</td>
<td><em>A caged animal, a prisoner in a cell, a person lost in the woods, a traveller without a map, a boat drifting with the current, a shipwreck stranded on a desert island</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to the need to change</td>
<td><em>Being molded like clay, changing shapes and colors.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying some control; being creative</td>
<td><em>Escaping into a beautiful never-land, conducting an experiment, doing magic, finding one’s way in an unfamiliar landscape</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion and Future Recommendation

While there already is a substantial body of research on bilinguals and emotions (Pavlenko, 2006, 2011; Kramsch, 1993, 2009; Arnold, 1999), the field of ESL has seen hardly any applications of the findings in the classroom. More often than not, there seems to be no time for a language instructor to consider the affective domain of writing in L2. Despite clear limitations such as the size of the sample or the amount of quantitative data, the pilot study presented here has confirmed that the questions it raises are perceived by Arab students as very relevant. Consequently, it points in the direction of future research. Students need assistance with learning how to express emotions in a culturally appropriate way and how to read correctly different levels of emotionality in the second language. At the same time, the emotions students feel when reading and writing in English are also an essential part of their learning experience; thus guiding them in the process of exploring, reflecting on and writing about these feelings is as important as developing their communicative competence. Like many others all over the world, Arab learners are concerned about their cultural identity in the age of globalization and fast-paced social changes. It is essential to show them that learning another language, a process filled with anxiety and frustration, can also be empowering, liberating and enjoyable.

References