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Drawing out the Silent Minority

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The overall ESL writing curriculum described briefly above is based on Janet Emig's theory that writing English academic discourse is essentially "learned behavior . . . an artificial process that . . . must provide its own context" for an audience that is usually absent. International students whose learning strategies and techniques for presenting material in their own languages may differ significantly from those used by native speakers of English need to learn this behavior. The goal of this curriculum is the preparation of international students to write culturally appropriate reader-based prose. That is, these students must be prepared to write prose that is acceptable to professors who are native speakers—that despite occasional second language errors is acceptable because the material has been presented in a format which matches that expected by the academic audience.

Notes


2. Elaine Dehghanpisheh, "Bridging the Gap Between Controlled and Free Composition: Controlled Rhetoric at the Upper-Intermediate Level," TESOL Quarterly, 13 (December, 1979), 511.


Drawing Out the Silent Minority, King Kok Cheung, University of California, Berkeley

Is there any connection between speaking up in class and writing well? If so, how can one bring the non-native speakers to speak? I believe there is some correlation between oral participation and writing progress. Although I have encountered good writers who never talk in class, these students are often eager readers. Unfortunately, the majority of undergraduates today are reluctant readers. Class discussion has therefore become an indispensable tool in generating ideas, and instructors need to devise pedagogical techniques which encourage participation. In this paper I will focus on how to draw out minority students, drawing on my experience as an Asian student who has known the pains and frustrations of being silent and my experience as an instructor of minority students.

Last year I was invited to teach freshman composition to Asian-American students. Many of them refused to talk at the beginning. The silent ones were mostly the im-
migrant and foreign students; their spoken English was very broken and their prose revealed similar difficulties, yet many of them were struggling to express profound ideas.

A Korean student, a senior in Engineering who had failed the course twice, came up with subtle and original ideas in his essays, though it took me a great deal of effort to figure out these ideas because they were poorly expressed. For a long time he was silent in class. He told me during my office hour that he hated English but was desperate for a passing grade. During subsequent class discussions I twice mentioned the Korean student by name and told the class what interesting insights he had offered in his essays. I even—after I had corrected all the errors—read part of one of his essays to the class as an example of the use of concrete detail.

The next week he started talking in class. It was almost painful to hear him speak. He had great difficulty getting a sentence out and what he said was unintelligible to the class and even to the instructor. Having learned English as a second language myself, I understood the chagrin of having to repeat oneself in class because of inarticulateness. Therefore, instead of making him repeat himself, I tried to guess what he was getting at and then articulate it in my own words. I would then ask him whether what I said was indeed what he meant. Often he would nod gratefully, but sometimes he would shake his head and rephrase what he was trying to say. By then the class and I usually could understand him.

Significantly, his attitude toward writing also changed as he began to contribute more and more in class. Because he received recognition for his ideas, he took greater pains to express them and made very pleasing progress. At the end I was able to pass him without compunction.

The case of the Korean student may be rare: a student who could hardly write but could produce interesting ideas might seem to be the exception rather than the rule. I too have had my share of silent students who are equally poor in thought and expression. To bring these students to speak in class may be more difficult, but no less rewarding. Participating in class will force them to think, which will in turn help them to generate ideas. Such mental exercise is a necessary step toward producing ideas on paper. I believe, therefore, that instructors should try to encourage students to speak, and I believe that this goal is not impossible to attain.

Toward the end of the quarter in which I was teaching Asian-Americans, all the students in my class had spoken without being pushed. I believe I succeeded in my attempt to draw out these students. Following are the techniques I used with the class; other instructors might find them useful.

1. Take advantage of the opportunity to listen when a minority student speaks. It takes tremendous courage for some minority students to speak up, so the instructor should let them speak immediately even if she sees only the ghost of a hand. That hand may never be raised again if another student is called.

2. Try to be patient with and attentive to students with a heavy accent. An instructor sometimes assumes that students with accents are incoherent. When in fact they may speak quite coherently. The instructor should keep in mind that every time she asks these students to repeat themselves, she reinforces or confirms their sense of their own inarticulateness and increases their self-consciousness; their apprehensiveness may soon become so severe that they may hesitate ever to speak again.

3. Help students to articulate ideas. For students who indeed speak incoherently and with great difficulty, the instructor may try to articulate the ideas for them instead of continually making the students repeat themselves.
4. Give positive reinforcement. Whenever possible, the instructor should give the quiet students positive feedback or at least comment on what they say; students who have difficulty speaking are very sensitive and vulnerable to implied negative reactions in the instructor's response or lack of it.

5. Call on the quiet students without forcing them to speak. An instructor can occasionally call on students who remain adamantly silent but pass on to another student if the quiet one has nothing to say. Sometimes the mere fact of being called upon motivates a student to say something later, even if the student does not respond immediately.

6. Practice group editing. Divide the class into groups and have them edit an anonymous paper. Students who are too shy to speak up in front of the whole class often feel much more at ease speaking up in a small group.

7. Include in the reading a text by a minority writer dealing with minority experiences. Minority students often respond to texts that deal with experiences to which they can relate.

I would add that while these techniques are especially applicable in dealing with minority students, most of my suggestions can be applied to quiet students in general.

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**Research in Effective Teaching of Writing**

A two-volume report describing college-level writing programs and program features is now available through ERIC. The report covers the first phase of a five-year project funded by the National Institute of Education and centered at the California State University. The project, directed by Edward M. White, is now in its second phase, which adds outcome measures to the descriptive material in order to discover the program features associated with student and faculty success. The third phase will relate project findings to composition theory. To obtain the first phase report request ERIC Nos. ED 239 292 and Ed 239 293. Other information about the research may be obtained from Professor White at the project office, 400 Golden Shore, Long Beach, CA 90802.

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**Conference on the Politics of Writing Instruction**

The conference will be held 22-23 March 1985 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and is sponsored by UNL's Department of English to honor Dudley Bailey on the occasion of his retirement. Speakers will include Frank Smith, James Sledd, Richard Young, teachers and administrators from all levels of education, newspaper editors, and business and legal personnel. For more information contact Robert D. Narveson, Department of English, Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0333. Telephone: 402/472-1808 or 472-1818.