

ตัวตนแบบสมัยนิยม ตัวตนแบบหลังสมัยนิยม และการสร้างผู้เขียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศใหม่

The Modern Subject, the Postmodern Subject, and the Reconstruction of the EFL Student Writer

สมศักดิ์ แก้วนุช¹

Somsak Kaewnuch¹

บทคัดย่อ

ในขณะที่การเน้นย้ำไวยากรณ์ หลักการใช้ และรูปแบบการเขียนของการสอนแบบกึ่งเก่าใหม่ (current-traditional approach) เป็นสิ่งที่จำเป็นอย่างยิ่งสำหรับนักเรียนไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ เรายังจำเป็นต้องปลูกฝังทักษะอื่นๆในวิชาการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษ โดยเฉพาะทักษะระดับสูงด้านการวิเคราะห์ การสังเคราะห์ และการประเมิน กอปรกับความเปลี่ยนแปลงอันรวดเร็วของโลกยุคปัจจุบันทักษะหรือคุณลักษณะอื่นๆที่นอกเหนือจากความรู้ทางภาษาจึงมีความจำเป็นยิ่งขึ้น ยกตัวอย่างเช่น ผู้เรียนจะต้องเรียนรู้อยู่เสมอที่จะจัดการกับความเปลี่ยนแปลงต่างๆอันเกิดจากเทคโนโลยีอย่างมีคุณธรรม และจริยธรรม ด้วยเหตุนี้ผู้เขียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศจึงควรมีสองลักษณะ โดยด้านหนึ่งเป็นตัวตนแบบสมัยนิยม (modern) และอีกด้านหนึ่งเป็นตัวตนแบบหลังสมัยนิยม (postmodern) ตัวตนแบบสมัยนิยมมีลักษณะมีเหตุผล มีคุณธรรม และสามารถแสวงหาความรู้ที่ซับซ้อนได้ ตัวตนแบบหลังสมัยนิยมมีความสามารถทางเทคโนโลยี ปรับตัวกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงได้ง่าย และมีประสบการณ์ทางโลกมากกว่า

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¹ ภาควิชาหลักสูตรและการสอน, คณะครุศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏพิบูลสงคราม 080 638 5702

¹ Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University 080 638 5702
ajarnsomsak@yahoo.com

Abstract

While the emphases of current-traditional rhetoric on grammar, usage, and form are indispensable for our Thai EFL students, we need to inculcate other skills in our students, especially the high-order skills of *analysis*, *synthesis*, and *evaluation*. Coupled with fast changes of the current world, other skills and qualities are also needed out of our students. For example, our students should always seek knowledge to cope with the changes due to technology in moral and ethical ways. As a result, the reconstructed EFL writer should possess characteristics of both the modern subject and the postmodern subject. The modern subject is rational, moral, and transcendental. The postmodern subject is technologically competent, easy to adapt to changes, and more worldly experienced. The reconstructed EFL writer is a combination of them.

Keywords: modern subject, postmodern subject, reconstruction of EFL writer, EFL writing

Introduction

In composition, we can think of the writer as a human subject, a person who expresses ideas, who, from his or her action and speech, may be thought as strong, polite, moral, arrogant, knowledgeable, and so on. However, in the EFL context, although one of our major responsibilities, of course, is to promote the kind of subjectivity that society needs, we do not normally think of how we should pedagogically shape our students in order for them to leave school and live in society in ways we think suitable. One of the reasons, as Gebhard (1991) points out, is that English in the ESL context, and certainly for the author in the EFL context, is taught mainly for careers, businesses, services, and higher education. It is obvious that linguistic competence is the primary goal. In the EFL context especially, students need the language, its grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, as the tool for expression.

The topic of the present paper, the creation of student subjectivity, gets little attention from teachers and theorists of EFL writing instruction. It is of course arguable that while teaching, EFL teachers indirectly imprint in their students the subjectivity that society needs. Think of the times, for example, when they discipline lazy students and when they penalize cheating students. Many English curricula nowadays also try to foster specific abilities, qualities, or the kinds of English required by jobs, such as English for engineers, hospitality in tourism or business, and academic English. In addition, almost all curricula try to inculcate what Crowley (1998) calls the “universal subjectivity,” in which students are expected to be, for instance, skilled communicators, critical thinkers, citizens of a democracy, and oppositional critics of their own cultures and others’. However, subjectivity and the creation of student subjectivity have rarely or never been serious topics for us, Thai EFL teachers. More often than not, we normally do not have a chance to

write a curriculum ourselves but have to teach according to it. And even if our English curriculum aims at promoting desirable social qualities in our students, the courses that we teach are often too specific, crowded with linguistic topics, thus making it hard to include the teaching of subjectivity. In addition, we never discuss whether the expertise in subject matters, working skills, and linguistic competence we try to instill in our students are enough, or are what our society really expects.

This paper, focusing on the construction of subjectivity, diverges from EFL teachers' routines such as teaching grammar and organization, building vocabulary, and correcting errors. If we think that we are always submerged under those activities from the beginning till the end of the semester, teaching subjectivity is a totally different dimension, but it, the author believes, fulfills not only some major objectives of English program curriculums but also the philosophy of more recent theorists of composition.

The paper starts with describing the condition of EFL writing instruction. Then it distinguishes between the modern subject and the postmodern subject. After that, it connects the differences or conflicts between the two subjects with the condition of EFL writing instruction and discusses how we should construct the EFL student writer. Finally, it concludes and suggests how we might incorporate subjectivity into our teaching.

The Condition of EFL Writing Instruction

The classification by Thomas Kent (1993) best explains the condition of EFL writing instruction. Kent distinguishes between the background knowledge and the writing act. The former refers to the teaching such matters as grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and organization. In other words, the former focuses on the rules that are teachable. The latter refers to the qualities of writing that cannot be objectively controlled, in other words, qualities that are hard to teach. That writing is difficult to teach is supported by the fact that writing is disruptive, discursive, and contingent (Faigley, 1992). From Kent's categorization, we are sure that EFL writing instruction is geared much more towards teaching the background knowledge. Even more advanced classes at university still emphasize organizational genres, such as cause and effect essays and comparison and contrast essays. That is, the content is still squeezed into visible parts of introduction, body, and conclusion.

If we look at the approaches to teaching writing, we find that EFL writing instruction mostly follows the approach called "current-traditional rhetoric." The practices of this approach are similar to our teaching activities. According to Crowley (1998), current-traditional rhetoric emphasizes form and textbooks of this pedagogy "always begin with consideration of the smallest units of discourse: words and sentences" (p. 95). This rhetoric discriminates four genres: expository, description, narration, and argument (EDNA). It also

"[idealizes] a single format—the five-paragraph theme" and "[expounds] the supposedly universal principles of unity, coherence, and emphasis" (p. 94). It also emphasizes formal essays and academic papers (Yong, 1978). Emphases on academic writing, standard forms, and grammar are major characteristics of current-traditional rhetoric (Kennedy, 1998). From this short description, we can imagine that the teacher teaches, for example, parts of speech, sentence patterns, different forms of organization, outlining, the use of transitional words, and citing secondary sources.

To be sure that we do all those activities, explore the English programs on the websites of some universities in our society. For example, at University A, there are only two writing courses offered in the English curriculum of the Faculty of Education. The first course focuses on everyday written English and uses genres of writing to teach, such as notes, memos, notice boards, and greeting cards. The second course is for paragraph writing that emphasizes features necessary for clarity and fluency and has its students practice description, narration, exemplification, classification, comparison, cause and effect, and so on. In other words, at this university students are only expected to demonstrate their abilities to follow form and to use language grammatically and correctly. At University B, more nationally well-known and prestigious, there are three writing courses offered in the English curriculum of the Faculty of Humanities. The first course, designed to practice paragraph writing, emphasizes description, exposition, and narration, and features of coherence, unity, and complete-

ness. This fundamental course also considers language accuracy, critical thinking, and creativity. The second course is the continuation from the first course, strengthening all skills practiced in the first course. This course deals with longer discourses in different genres of essays such as comparison, contrast, cause-effect, and argument. This course of course stresses conciseness and clarity achieved through correct and skilled use of language. The writing sounds academic due to the required genres and use of secondary sources. Like in the first course, it still considers critical thinking and creativity, which is somehow contradictory because it accentuates form. Form limits thinking, but creativity and critical thinking expands it. The third writing course is fully-fledged academic writing with the use of a variety of sources.

There is no doubt that University A heavily adopts current-traditional rhetoric. So does University B, although it also incorporates other approaches. The emphasis on form and linguistic ability of the two universities is obviously the application of the rhetoric. But even the second and third courses at University B, which are more advanced and geared toward academic writing, still make use of organizational patterns, a major characteristic of the current-traditional approach.

However, integrating critical thinking and creativity, and also the use of secondary sources, University B may be said to implement process, expressivist, and post-process approaches. The key tenet of process and expressivist approaches is the writer's freedom. In these approaches, students can use their own language and formats (Murray, 1997). Theorists

of these approaches, for example, Donald M. Murray (1968), Peter Elbow (1998), and Ken Macrorie (1970), support that students use writing to recreate their original experiences, to develop themselves as persons, and to make themselves better writers, thinkers, and citizens. In helping students to develop themselves, process and expressivist approaches encourage such activities as freewriting, peer reviewing, group discussing, and collaborative learning. Thus, the two approaches teach students that writing is rhetorical and socially constructed. The post-process approach maintains the idea that writing is socially constructed but expands to cover writing that is produced in the real world, writing that is not taught just in the classroom (McComiskey, 2000). The use of secondary sources, whether it is quotations, statistics, graphs, colors, or images, is one technique of post-process pedagogy.

The above description about English writing instruction in our context at Universities A and B proves that we largely rely on current-traditional rhetoric. As a result, three terms may be used to describe current-traditional rhetoric and also the condition of EFL writing instruction-non-rhetoric, positivism, and reductionism. Crowley (1998) describes current-traditional rhetoric as “arhtorical” because it does not seriously consider the rhetorical situation of the writing, or matters of purpose, exigency, audience, culture, and occasion. It focuses on the product rather than on the process. It only expects students to show their grammatical and organizational skills, ignoring the social and communicative

function of writing. All these are true of the Thai EFL writing classroom, which heavily adopts this rhetoric. In a basic writing class, writing is more often than not a demonstration of writing skills, and the teacher often assigns his students to, for example, describe a room, narrate a past event, and state the dangers of smoking. These tasks, writing about known facts, are not rhetorical.

Next, although current-traditional rhetoric is invented and maintained by humanists, it adopts, as Berlin (1984) points out, a positivist view. Positivism believes that things can always be seen or proved, that knowledge or truth exists out there and waits for individuals to discover, that knowledge is stable and unchanging, and that knowledge is always teachable. In the field of writing, such beliefs are reflected, especially in our EFL context, in the emphasis on grammar and correctness. Each student must seek grammatical knowledge by him/herself. Such beliefs can also be thought to be the origin of rubrics. Rubrics are rooted in positivism in that they try to prove that the knowledge about grammar and organization is stable, teachable, and testable. Most rubrics emphasize grammar and organization. Rubrics also send a message that writing skills are universal; that is, they believe that people across cultures can follow their criteria.

Finally, current-traditional rhetoric as well as EFL writing instruction also fosters reductionism. This reduction is seen in the way we teach and measure writing. In teaching, we certainly spend a lot of time teaching grammar and correcting errors. Some of us feel bad if they can not cover all grammar topics stated in

the course syllabus. However, grammar topics are always related to one another; therefore, it is difficult to teach one topic without mentioning another topic. Some of us feel that it is necessary to correct errors and to explain to their students how to avoid errors. Teaching grammar and correcting errors certainly consumes a huge amount of time. However, there is another half to teach, organization. Organization involves learning how to write effective topic sentences, to think of major and minor supporting details, and to connect points with transitions. These are already a lot of work, but in reality teaching organization also involves showing effective and ineffective samples. To sum up, current-traditional rhetoric and EFL writing instruction reduce teaching to grammar and organization, making teachers pay less attention to other writing qualities.

Reductionism in current-traditional rhetoric and EFL writing instruction is also reflected in the use of rubrics to maintain reliability. To sustain reliability, rubrics try to keep simple. For example, in 1961 three ETS researchers (Diederich, French, and Carlton), instead of seeking to “understand and carefully map out the swampy, rocky, densely forested terrain of writing assessment,” derived five factors, all of which have been used widely in American modern writing assessment: ideas, form, flavor, mechanics, and wording (Broad, 2003, p.5). Wilson (2006) points out that such simplification, objectification, and standardization of writing assessment overlook many other factors. Wilson states that factors that influence our evaluations and assessments are complex, nuanced, and changeable depending on the

context. To put it differently, they are subjective. However, Wilson continues, because our educational theory is based on reliability and objectivity, we use rubrics to solidify and externalize our reactions to our students’ writing.

Therefore, whether it uses rubrics or emphasizes grammar and form, EFL writing instruction fails to notice other writing qualities. It pays little or even no attention to such matters as voice, ethos, agency, change or growth as a person, creativity, critical thinking, richness, understanding of the rhetorical situation, and so on. Subjectivity is certainly one of the topics that get little or even no attention, although the very purpose of providing education is to produce desirable citizens.

The Modern Subject and the Postmodern Subject

If one kind of subject is to be constructed, it is a good idea to differentiate two kinds of subject in order that we can say which kind of subject, one of the two or the combination of them, is the one we want to construct. The author chooses to distinguish between the modern and the postmodern subjects and imagines that the EFL writer possesses good human characteristics from these two subjects. The modern subject and the postmodern subject are thought to be opposite because they have been defined by contradictory philosophical concepts. Both of them, however, have strengths and weaknesses. The construction of the EFL writer should be a combination of their strengths.

Modernity is an imaginary age in which people are expected to be educated, intelligent,

moral, and transcendental, and in which the city is civilized (Eagleton, 2001). Thinkers of this age may be thought to have come from various cultures. A prominent modern thinker is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who thinks that humans possess transcendental abilities that enable them to reach absolute truths or ultimate knowledge. Kant points out that the eternal world is purely subjective and only through the use of reason can humans turn experiences into truths (Law, 2007; Wikipedia). The Buddha (560-480 BC) could be thought to be a modern thinker too. To achieve enlightenment or nirvana, according to the Buddha, humans need to concentrate and meditate (Law, 2007). Another modern thinker is the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1690), who believes that certainty and knowledge begin with the self. Knowledge, for Descartes, is built upon the tenet "I think, therefore I am" (Bressler, 2003). From these few modern thinkers, we can see that modernism emphasizes individual growth, which perfectly is reflected in general our educational system, in the kind of education Dewey (1997) calls "traditional education," as opposed to "progressive education." The traditional education is described as "education from within"; that is, the student seeks and evaluates knowledge solitarily, making use of his own thinking mostly.

Thus, the modern subject is described as a coherent self, a person with a conscious mind able to tackle with complex information as a way to discover knowledge. Edmund Husserl points out that consciousness "intends" the world and constitutes knowledge (as cited in Kolakowski, 2008). In education, the modern

subject, being coherent and conscious, is supposed to understand how to, for example, solve mathematics problems and combine words, phrases, and clauses into complete sentences. In writing a paragraph or an essay, the modern subject should be able to foresee how the different parts—major and minor points—would be arranged to support the thesis.

The postmodern subject, on the other hand, is not viewed as a coherent, atomistic self. Postmodern theory rejects that consciousness or reason originates in the mind of a person, arguing that the subject is not the locus or cause of discourse but its effect (Faigley, 1992). The condition of the postmodern subject is described clearly in Marxism. Marxism offers us an understanding about society, economy, politics, and culture, arguing that it is life, not consciousness, and interactions, not any spiritual entity, that shape our ideas and concepts (Bressler, 2003). Karl Marx believes that economic and social conditions "determine religious beliefs, legal systems, and cultural frameworks" ("Marxist Views"). In other words, rather than a creator of things, the human subject is created.

Therefore, words that may be used to describe the postmodern subject include "unconscious," "incoherent," "dispersed," "multiple," "technological," "vulnerable," and "instable." In *Solf City*, Jonathan Raban depicts the city of the current age as a theater, a labyrinth, and a network of social interactions (Raban, 2008). As a consequence, there is much randomness, ambiguity, and chaos in the lives of humans (Faigley, 1992). The randomness, ambiguity, and chaos are expressed in the works of novelists, artists, musicians, sport promoters,

politicians, film makers, graphic designers, and advertisers (ibid.). In addition, people have new ways of communication. According to Mark Poster (1990), communication is now shifted from oral and print language to electronic language. Electronic technologies offer more ways to receive information that is necessarily complex. As a result, “the self is decentered, dispersed, and multiple in continuous instability” (p. 6). People also have more social roles and “personal identity has been rendered soft, fluid, and endlessly open the exercise of the will and the imagination” (Harvey, 1990, p. 5).

However, there is one characteristic which modernism and postmodernism share—their intention to spawn desirable citizens, citizens that are moral and ethical. The terms “morality” and “ethics” may be used interchangeably; they both refer to rules or norms for appropriate conduct (Kelemen & Peltonen, 2001). Modern or liberal theories that trust individuals’ capacities believe that individuals can make their own rational or optimal choices. In the modernist view, a moral way of life is following one’s desire for happiness and achievement, and an immoral or unethical way arouses guilt and unhappiness (ibid.). On the other hand, postmodern or communal theories, which posit that humans are effects of interactions, believe that collective self-consciousness help maintain ethics and morality (ibid.). Theorists of postmodernism fear that individualistic hedonism would promote self-interest and thus break society, so they call for conformity or communism to hold society together (Faigley, 1992).

Reconstructing the EFL Writer

Any teaching approach has certain potential to mold students. So does our current-traditional instruction. Our teaching that emphasizes usage, grammar, and form may be said to have produced graduates good at communicating and qualified for various jobs. In the EFL context, well-paid jobs usually require persons who can communicate with people and institutions through writing. Thus, our instruction may be said to be successful in constructing linguistic and working ability as part of the desirable subjectivity specified by most language curricula. Our instruction may also be said to have promoted critical, analytical, interpretative, synthetic, and evaluative skills in students, as specified, for example, by the advanced writing courses at University B. Such high-order skills are highly valued by theorists of composition (Broad, 2003).

However, when we compare the methodology of current-traditional instruction with Bloom’s taxonomy, we find that our teaching is likely to strengthen the lower categories much more than the higher ones. Bloom’s original taxonomy consists of six categories: *knowledge*, *comprehension*, *application*, *analysis*, *synthesis*, and *evaluation* (Krathwohl, 2002). It seems that our instruction—which involves memorizing rules, understanding categories and classification, and applying models—largely endorses the first three categories. What we need to do in our teaching, therefore, is to increase skills in the areas of the last three categories. In fact, the above discussion about the modern and postmodern

subjects shows that our current-traditional education—which is, for Dewey, education from within—is mostly aimed toward inculcating the human qualities of the modern subject—that is, being rational, ethical, and transcendental. In other words, students with such qualities should be able to perform skills in Bloom’s last three categories. The conclusion, therefore, is that modernist education, or current-traditional education, does not successfully spawn subjects with synthetic, analytic, and evaluative skills, qualities highly valued by most educators and by theorists of composition. Education from within, from the conscious, coherent mind, hence, is inadequate, especially in this rapidly changing world.

That is the main reason why we need to reconstruct the EFL writer. It seems now that we need subjects who adapt to changes well and who deal with the outside world well, in other words, subjects with postmodern qualities. While many words used to describe the postmodern subject are negative (e.g. dispersed, instable, incoherent, vulnerable, and so on), the subject also has many good qualities. For example, he is more exposed to technological advancements, and thus more technologically competent. The postmodern subject is, in addition, more open to social stories or events and hence has more experiences about outside world. The postmodern subject’s conscious mind, as a result, is constantly urged to interpret, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate its surroundings, although these may not happen in long periods due to the multiplicity, instability, and chaos of the current world.

The new EFL writer must have qualities

of both the modern and postmodern subjects. Certainly, the emphases on usage, grammar, and form are still necessary in our context. Any teaching should be context-dependent. Our students need the language as the tool for learning the language itself, and due to the unavailability and inadequacy of English, as well as their anxiety and other factors, they need guidelines for writing. Thus, the teaching of usage, grammar, and form should still be the major part of our instruction, perhaps around 60%. The rest 40% should be spent helping students to improve their high-order modernist qualities, their interpretative, analytical, critical, and evaluative skills. This will add student-centeredness to our instruction, thus reducing the teacher-centered portion.

To achieve the second part of our instruction, we only need to help our students learn, in Dewey’s term, “from without,” that is, from the outside world. Students should not be asked to write out of their experience only, out of their own narrow world only. Instead, they should have opportunities to negotiate with others, for instance, in conversations with others and in reading what they write. By speaking with others, reading a number of texts, watching movies, listening to songs, surfing websites, and so on, students have opportunities to negotiate their experience with others’, thus improving their high-order skills. The outside world has numerous events, situations, and conditions that help them improve these skills better than if they only write from their own perspectives. Teachers must be creative in designing activities and situations to promote learning. For example,

a teacher can divide his students and have them sit in circles where each student talks for five minutes on a given topic, of course in their native tongue if they feel more comfortable. After that, the students can go back to their seats and write on their own. In this way they can have knowledge created through collaborative learning, socially-constructed knowledge, for their writing. Such an activity is an example of postmodernist education.

Finally, we must try to get rid of the weaknesses of our current teaching when designing an assignment. The weaknesses include the failure to inculcate high-order skills, the heavy reliance upon objectivity and reductionism, the lack of emphases on ethics and morality, and the little unawareness that writing is rhetorical and that knowledge is socially constructed. We can design an assignment to improve each of these in particular, but we should carefully design an assignment that can simultaneously improve all of them, or some of them. Writing assignments that can do so are usually situational. A situational writing assignment begins something like "A twelve-year-old boy lives with his grandparents....."

Conclusion

Even in this current age of globalization, people are not well connected by advanced communicative technology, and even if they are connected, their interactions are done in fast

and chaotic manners. Everything around us goes so fast that we lose our real, concentrated consciousness dealing with them. In fact, people now can be thought of becoming more separated. Two people sitting close to each other in a train do not turn to smile to each other but focus on their mobile phones, talking to people far away. Serious and long speaking rarely takes place in a family. Many children are left alone at home while their parents work outside.

The above scenario supports why we need to reconstruct our EFL student writer. While the emphases of current-traditional rhetoric on grammar, usage, and form are indispensable for our Thai EFL students, we need to inculcate other skills in our students, especially the high-order skills of *analysis*, *synthesis*, and *evaluation*. Coupled with fast changes of the current world, other skills and qualities are also needed out of our students. For example, our students should always seek knowledge to cope with the changes in moral and ethical ways. As a result, the reconstructed EFL writer should possess characteristics of both the modern subject and the postmodern subject. The modern subject is rational, moral, and transcendental. The postmodern subject is technologically competent, easy to adapt to changes, and more worldly experienced. The reconstructed EFL writer is a combination of them.

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