A Thai student writes - towards the understanding of the writing of overseas post-graduate students in Australian Universities.

Rick Flavell
Monash University
rflavell@vaxc.cc.monash.edu.au

Introduction

"I concluded that...academic writing tasks were indeterminate historical moments in human relationships, which like all such moments, combined elements of order, convention, and continuity with elements of chance, anomaly, and rupture." (Prior, 1995, p.53)

The randomness suggested by Prior’s conclusion provides a challenge for educators given that the production by students of extended pieces of writing is central to tertiary education. Not all courses at every level in the Australian University system require that students complete more than short writing tasks but most post-graduate study demands completing structured pieces of academic writing of a substantial length. In Australia, essay writing issues at this level are further complicated given that overseas students, many from very different language and cultural backgrounds than local students, form
an increasing proportion of postgraduate student numbers. Little
direct research with this group has been completed and work that would
illuminate essays produced at this level must come from a number of
areas.

Much of the understanding of writing of second language students comes
from consideration of first language writing. Writing is a complex
process and scholarship has theorised it in a number of different ways.
Once conceptualised simply as a skill, a notion which has never quite
left us, traditionalist views were
somewhat overshadowed when writing as a process came into vogue in the
eighties following the work of theorists such as Donald Graves, James
Britton and others. Latterly, although not without much debate, those who
prefer to view writing through genre understandings - however defined -
such as Swales and Miller (Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990) in America and others, like Jim Martin and Frances Christie (see, for example, Martin, Christie et al., 1987) in Australia have
been influential. Researchers interested in second language writing in
academic settings have used genre understandings to discuss the writing
of nonnative speakers (Bhatia, 1993; Swales and Feak, 1994
, for example) often with a focus of designing courses for such
students.

A slightly different approach, although not necessarily
uncomplementary, is taken by those who view universities as discourse
communities and see students as apprentices or learners of the
discourses necessary to be members of that particular community (Bizzell, 1987; Freedman, 1993; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995).

In this scenario overseas students must adopt a process of what was
depicted by Toulmin (1972) as "enculturation" or following
the work by people such as Bazerman demonstrating
that there are different ways of viewing the world in different
disciplinary communities, as "disciplinary enculturation" (Jolliffe and Brier, 1988). In this view, the emphasis falls on
writing in a way that fits the way of thinking of the discipline (see Faigley and Hansen, 1985 for example; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995) and not on the student.

Such approaches have their main value in generalising the nature of
academic writing and disciplinary communities. The explanatory power
of such theories must be tested by studying individual writers in
specific settings. Trueba (1990) conceptualises text
production as having broad cultural values as its first dimension.

This would suggest that cultural patterning of the overseas student is
a fundamental and essential part of that person's writing and this
would appear to be confirmed by studies of individual writers such as
Farrell (1997) and San Miguel (1996). An emphasis on the discourse community nature of universities is likely to
be less explanatory of the writing of overseas students because the
primal nature of the writers' cultural origins has been under-valued.
The "disciplinary community" view is further complicated by its definition. A business community may have particular discourses but within it, this is further broken down into disciplines such as Accounting, Economics, Management and so on and complicated by different spheres of operation like commerce, finance or academia, or within universities by different departments and subjects and so the units get smaller and smaller. Generalised notions must be tested by looking at particular individuals in particular settings. It is by intimate involvement at the point of engagement that the complexity of existent situations may be captured.

The study

This paper arises out of a study of the writing of students in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) subject at a leading Australian University. It makes some reflections about post-graduate student writing by close consideration of just one student. The focus of the paper is an essay written by a Thai student in an MBA subject called, "Foundations of Management". The data used to develop the ideas comes from the essay itself, from the woman who wrote it - here called "Sariga", from interviews and discussion with her, her lecturer and others associated with the MBA, from the lectures in the Foundations of Management subject and other course and university material.

The question considered is, "How is Sariga’s MBA essay to be viewed?"

Four perspectives are offered- the student perspective, the university perspective, a language perspective and the lecturer’s perspective.
The claim is made that each of these perspectives offers an interested and hence partial representation of the truth and that Sariga’s essay should be seen as an event that is more dynamic and more fluid than any of these perspectives would separately suggest.

(a) Student perspectives

With regard to the student perspective it is important to know the writer. Sariga is a young woman whose home country is Thailand. She is a multi-lingual person schooled in Thai. Sariga comes from a family of Chinese origin and speaks to her family in both Thai and a Chinese dialect. She learnt English as a foreign language subject both at school and university. She did a degree in Hotel Studies at a Thai University before working for two and half years in the Canadian Embassy in Thailand where she used a mixture of Thai, English and French. Sariga came to Australia in 1995 and did a one year post-Graduate course in Marketing before starting an MBA at the beginning of 1996. She was one member of the class of about 70 students studying the subject, "Foundations of Management" in the second semester of 1996 and a volunteer participant in the study into academic writing.

Sariga is an impressive person. She presents as a sophisticated young person who dresses well, and has an animated and friendly affect. Sariga is an independent person who lives alone, says laughingly she has "too many" friends, mainly other Thai students. She describes
herself as doing very well in Thailand and communicated that her superiors at the Canadian Embassy were disappointed when she resigned.

She emphasised how busy she was with her studies here, her success to this point and her expectation of completing the course in the minimum time. Sariga anticipated that completion of the MBA here would be of great benefit when she returned to Thailand both in terms of currency in getting a job, possibly in a Multi-national company, and she also expected that the theory she learnt here would be useful.

The essay at the focus of this study was two and half thousand word in length, and represented 40% of Sariga's assessment for the Foundations subject, the other 60% assessment being an essay written in a two hour exam. To satisfy requirements of the course, a pass was required in both essays.

Sariga's essay was an attempt to meet one of the requirements of this subject and what is emphasised here is that it was presented by a Thai student. Sariga is one of over 50,000 overseas students in Australian universities whose view of the world has been formed in another culture and who are here as sojourners. These students will return home after their studies. Australian universities have a significant number of local student of backgrounds other than English who may share some past similarities with Sariga and other overseas students. However it is the future of these overseas students that is very different. Sariga


came from Thailand; she will return to Thailand. She may never write another English sentence and certainly the peculiar language of an Australian academic essay is something she could be near certain that she will never write again. The student perspective must cause us to ponder whether the same sets of requirements are necessary for sojourning students as for local students.

(b) University perspectives

The consideration of Sariga’s essay must be sensitive to University perspectives. From the point of view of the institution the essay, and the course of which it is a part, has a number of aims:

(i) to meet the needs of local and overseas students.

The context is the importance to Australia of overseas students. Whether the interest is in maintaining the two billion dollar per annum export industry, or in the viability of universities and university courses, or academic jobs, it is now an accepted fact by University administrations, government and most of the community that students such as Sariga are important.

The challenge for courses like the MBA is to meet the needs of Sariga while also meeting the needs of the two-thirds students in this course who are local and whose language and cultural backgrounds and futures are very different from those overseas students.
(ii) to fulfil a place in the international business community.

Contemporary MBA courses operate conscious of the so called "borderless world" especially given that the business world could be considered the most globalised aspect of society \(^\text{ADDIN ENRef}\) (Ohmae, 1991). Increase in trade between countries, multi-national companies, off-shore operations, even international tax havens are all aspects of modern business that demand that an MBA course must offer their graduates what is necessary to take part. A narrow Anglo-Australian emphasis will not achieve this. Sariga's ambitions are appropriate for such a course.

(iii) to uphold the universities reputation as an academic institution.

Universities are inevitably and necessarily concerned with being viewed as having high standards. Literacy levels at university is a sometimes media topic and the subject of contradictory studies \(^\text{ADDIN ENRef}\) (Bush, 1997, p.110). The difficulty centres on a lack of definition as to what it is that is to be measured.

An example from this study is a clear illustration of the difficulty.

Students in the MBA subject, including Sariga, were given "Notes on Written Work" to assist with the essay. Part of this read:

Spelling and Grammar. If using the "z" spelling of words like "organisation", then do so consistently throughout the paper for all similar words ("specialisation", for example), except when referring to titles or when quoting extracts from which alternative spellings are used. The same rule applies if using the "s" spelling. Avoid slang
and ungrammatical constructions.

Sariga's essay begins with the sentence, "The multinational corporation at present has an important role and even greater force than it was in the past decades." National spelling conventions are not the problem for Sariga. The general instruction, "Avoid ... ungrammatical constructions" is pointless if the student does not know they are ungrammatical. Sariga's essay contains 94 sentences, or groups of words between full stops. Seventy-five of them contain one or more grammatical errors and just 19 follow accepted Australian grammar rules. Sariga's essay passed. This is not to argue that grammar equals standards nor that Sariga should not have passed. By traditional understandings of good and correct writing Sariga's essay falls far short but her essay and those like it provide a challenge to redefine what is important in university courses and especially in how it is assessed. The absurdity of the grammar instructions in the notes in the light of the expression in Sariga’s essay is simply a stark instance of how by viewing such essays through traditional academic and community perspectives is no longer adequate. New understandings are needed.

(c) Language perspectives

Language perspectives provide some further insights into how Sariga's essay may be regarded. Writing has been conceptualised variously and Sariga's essay is considered as an example of a number of these.

(i) as an exhibition of skills.
The view of literacy, and hence of writing, most often held by non-specialists in the field is to see it as a set of skills that can be taught, learned and used. Most specialists now see it as unhelpful to view writing in this way but care must be taken that it is not said that skills do not matter. Effective communication demands using recognisable spelling of words, the ability to delineate chunks of information by using sentences and paragraphs and so on with the multitude of other building blocks of writing.

Sariga’s essay, written under the heading, "Ethics and Management", was in response to the topic,

(a) What environmental standards are appropriate when Western multi-nationals do business in developing countries?
(b) Are Shell’s dealings with the Nigerian government defensible? If not, why not?

Sariga’s essay is enhanced by such writing as, "Multinationals should take a neutral line on the politics of the countries in which they invest and trade. It is obvious that Shell has failed to conform..." and the effectiveness of her writing is reduced by such sentences as, "In support of the social contract concept, Shell’s deniable argument on its social irresponsibility in particular for Ogoni community does show in some respects of Shell’s concern on the problematic issue of the society as such the environment." A skills approach to Sariga’s essay, with its multitude of sentences where comprehension is similarly difficult, would adjudge her work inadequate. She has been unable to
communicate clearly her understanding of the topic. And yet there is also insufficient evidence to be able to say that she has not an appropriate conceptual understanding of the ideas that the essay topic raises. Clearly writing skills are involved in Sariga’s essay but to focus on writing as a skill is to raise the question as to whether new understandings are needed to effectively evaluate students such as her.

(ii) as the completion of a process.

Sariga’s essay can be considered in relation to the processes of which it was a part: The setting of the topic, the information gathering, the drafting, reviewing, rewriting, submitting, grading, regrading, response. There is value in studying the steps, the genealogy, of Sariga’s essay. One interesting aspect revealed by the process was the strong sense of ownership that Sariga developed for her essay. Transcripts of interviews with her reveal an insistence that the essay was discussed in very general terms only with her friends and not at all with the lecturer. Further, like those of most other overseas students in this study, the essay was not read by anyone other than herself before submission while all six of the local students who were participants in the study had their essays read by others during the drafting process. It was clearly important to Sariga to present herself as an independent writer. Perhaps this is because overseas students are taught that they problem with plagiarism or perhaps the reasons are deeper. As a sojourner in an alien world, the fight to preserve a sense of self is real.
(iii) as a demonstration of the mastery of a genre.

One of the great difficulties in talking about writing and genre is that the term "genre" has multiple meanings and is used in different ways by different people. In the context in which Sariga’s essay is considered, her writing can be examined to see if it represents an appropriate representation of the type of response to the essay question given above. For example, Sariga is not expected to write in a form that might tell us a heart-rending story of an Ogoni family destroyed by Shell’s actions in Nigeria, nor in any number of other possible forms but she is expected to write a structured, referenced argument. What this means in an Australian context has been generalised by a number of writers, (including Clanchy and Ballard, 1991). However Sariga’s exposure to this type of writing in Australia is limited. She is a graduate from a Thai university with evidence of successful mastery of the appropriate genres for that setting. In an interview Sariga said, "..but here it is quite different and like in this particular topic, you have to write the argumentative essay." Ulla Connor’s summary of some the genre-specific research done in different communities, confirms that Sariga would not be alone amongst writers in alien settings in finding significant differences.

(iv) as a qualification to enter a discourse community.

There are ways of presenting yourself through your writing that pertain to Australian Universities, to post-graduate courses, to the MBA, to
this Foundations of Management subject and even to this Ethics and Management unit within the subject. The lecturer said, "(Students) simply paraphrase some of texts. Now in a sense there is nothing really wrong with that if they are first or second year,...but it’s not what you expect of graduate student." Sariga’s essay was to be evaluated as one that does or does not speak the language of the graduate student - in this case an MBA student writing on an Ethics topic. The question, although no doubt not consciously formed, in the mind of the lecturer as she reads Sariga’s essay will be, "Does it qualify her as a member of this discourse community?"

(v) as a sociocognitive act.

This provides another way of looking at the essay from a language point view. Writing is an act. It is derived from the brain’s response to a social situation. Sariga wrote this particular essay because for nearly thirty years her brain has been responding to social situations building sets of symbols to represent her world and here in response to particular stimuli, an essay topic, lectures, reading, etc., her brain formulates words which she has drawn from her social world and which she assembles into this essay. It has both psychological and social dimensions and the model that is to be most helpful in understanding the essay must provide for the differences which Sariga brings to these dimensions.

(d) Lecturer perspectives
It is worthwhile noting that the lecturer is also the agent of the university and the perspectives here to some extent feed into those noted earlier. The lecturer is required to give Sariga a mark but the lecturer involved here also saw it as part of her role to make helpful comments on the essay. Thus her role is both summative and diagnostic.

The lecturer is here called, "Janice Mitchell". Janice emphasised her Australian identity. She described herself as, "7th. generation Australian. I’m about the most Australian person you will ever meet."

She completed all her degrees in Australian universities, has lectured in Australian universities and in this subject in the MBA course for a number of years. She has published widely in the area of Ethics and Management and could be described as person well versed in the discourses of this community. Janice has lectured to groups containing overseas students but has no specific training in language issues related to such students nor in general writing issues. From her perspective, how is Sariga’s essay to be viewed?

The marking of the essay provides some insights. Sariga’s essay was marked under what Janice called, "Terrible, terrible time pressures." - one of over 100 essays in two subjects marked in a ten day period. The MBA essays were placed in two piles, one with "the English-sounding" names, which were marked first and the other with foreign sounding names. Sariga’s essay was initially given an 8 out of 20 (although interestingly Janice remembered it as a 9) This, the "8", was written on the essay and changed in the lecture room as the essays were
returned to the students. Janice relates it like so,

"10 was the lowest mark because there were a couple of people I thought about giving 9s to and then I had a chat with Stuart (the lecturer in charge) about it and we decided since it was only a mark that the sensible thing was just to put them up a mark then, since at some stage they would probably be put up anyway.......We live in the real world."

The lecturer’s dilemma here, and it is not especially unusual, is that she feels the pressure not to fail an overseas student. And yet her initial response to Sariga’s essay is that it does not meet pass standard. The time pressures under which she works and her lack of expertise in second language writing do not allow for a more thorough consideration of the essay. Australian universities do not have adequate policies or procedures to cope with situations like this.

What of the Anglo-Australian perspectives of merit? The essay is that of a Thai sojourner: It is a 7th. generation Australian marking it. The main diagnostic comment on Sariga’s essay was that it did not follow a single line of argument. Sariga said in response to this, "I don’t understand. I wrote down everything that is argument." While an analysis of the nature of the different understandings of argument as they are, or are not realised in Sariga’s essay, is beyond the scope of this paper earlier discussion referred to different cultural understandings which are relevant here. This Thai writer’s view of what constitutes an appropriate argument conflicts with the
expectations of her Australia lecturer. And there is no mechanism to explore those differences. Here there is only one valid view of what constitutes an argument, that of the person holding the power, the lecturer. Sariga's comment and essay suggest that this may not be so.

Models of viewing essay writing

What emerges from this close consideration of one post-graduate essay is some understanding of how such writing is currently understood. Sariga's essay and those like it, suggest a more generative model.

(i) Current model

Currently essay writing in Australian universities is most readily viewed as an event that takes place within the gated community of the institution. Here the master (the lecturer of either gender) initiates the apprentices into the discourses of the community. Essays such as Sarigas are seen as "problems" and the solutions are seen in terms of the gatekeeper raising the hurdles at the gate higher or for more assistance to be provided for students within the community. Within this model the evidence of this study would suggest either it will be necessary for overseas students to be more competent English writers before entry or that more and better concurrent support should be offered.

(ii) Alternative model
Alternatives to the current model do exist. Applying a model discussed by Brodkey (1996) in a different context, it is possible to reconceive how the essay is viewed and see it as event which takes place within a zone of contact where different world views meet and express themselves in a dynamic formative process and position themselves in relation to the course material and where meaning and success are the subject of debate and negotiation.

The key to understanding the essential difference in these models is that the first refers to a "community" that looks to shared values and the formation of norms where in the latter, a "zone of contact" presumes the mutual recognition of difference. A zone of contact provides space for the meeting of different ways of viewing the world and negotiating meaning. It sets up a dynamic that is a more useful and accurate way of viewing academic writing than is the first.

The perspectives of the student, university and lecturer would all fit more neatly to this latter model than the first. For example, the vast socio-cultural difference between student and lecturer, the globalised context, and even the somewhat clumsy raising of Sariga’s mark make more sense with this view.

Language considerations and the alternative model

Consider this awkward sentence from Sariga’s essay quoted earlier:
"In support of the social contract concept, Shell’s deniable argument on its social irresponsibility in particular for Ogoni community does show in some respects of Shell’s concern on the problematic issue of the society as such the environment."

If this sentence is reread a number of time a reasonable assumption of what Sariga is saying emerges along the lines of:

"Shell denies it was socially irresponsible in its behaviour towards the Ogoni people. The very fact that it will argue this does show, to some extent, that it is concerned with the problems of society, like those related to the environment."

This is a reasonably subtle argument but rather than the argument, it is the process used to determine meaning that is important. The poor expression causes the reader to consciously ask, "What is Sariga saying here about Shell? What does she mean?" The reader takes their own perceptions of what is meant by "social irresponsibility", "deniable" and so on, moves to the way Sariga has put these words together and puts an interpretation on them. There is a dynamic between the reader and the writing in the making of meaning for this sentence. And of course Sariga’s lack of skill in the language simply draws attention to this. This is how reading is always done, normally subconsciously, instantaneously, asking, "What is this person saying here?" Such is the nature of meaning making. It is always dynamic.
A process approach has as its aim a finished product and it is instructive to consider what the finished product is here. In the initial interview with Sariga and the other students they were all keen to guess what it was that the lecturer was looking for in the essay. Janice Mitchell, in setting the essay with the students, said to them, "I wouldn’t like to push people into a particular way of answering this." She also added, "This year I have singled out the two areas of environmental aspects and human rights violations and I would like some discussion of each of those areas." In an interview a few weeks later but before reading the essays she said, reflecting on the topic, "The big issues are cultural relativism, the environment and human rights abuses in non-democratic locations." In an interview after marking the essays she said, "The really central thing I was looking for whatever way they came out was that they could recognise that law and ethics are different and that just because the law allows something, that doesn’t give it an automatic tick, even if you are an ethical relativist."

Fundamentally, there is not really a change here but there is a development. The lecturer develops her ideas on what is important on reflecting on the topic and in particular in response to reading the essays. There is no right answer, a set product. The event is formative and dynamic for both lecturer and student.

Genre approaches seek to generalise the similarities in writings and stabilise experience and yet it is recognised that genres are dynamic and change. Genre theorists argue they change "in response to socio-cognitive needs." (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995,
The response to the topic as interpreted by Sariga, challenges a fixed view of genre and so does each and every essay. The use of genre approaches in reading essays is only helpful to the extent of its definition in the last essay. The meaning of writing cannot be embedded in this fixed way.

The discourse community perspective introduces a different sort of dilemma - that of the colonising nature of the English language processes. Sariga, even to be able to access the information about the MBA course must have a level of competence in English. She comes here completes her MBA and returns home. She inevitably takes home not just, presumably better English, but also a large measure of the discursive practices embedded in the community of which she has been a part. This may be seen as either a good or bad thing. Whichever, it is very necessary to be aware that this is happening and assist people like Sariga to have a similar critical awareness and to be able to maintain a sense of self in the process. The alternative model gives recognition to the student’s sense of self in a way that the current model does not.

Conclusion
The position of overseas students in Australian universities is important. Large numbers are here and their presence is generally valued. Research with this group is crucial. At post-graduate level where the writing of essays is normal, more consideration must be given to language issues for this group who will return to their home
countries after study here. This particular research looking at an essay of one Thai student suggests the need to rethink how such writing is viewed. Student, university, language and lecturer perspectives of this essay suggest an alternative conception involving a zone of contact where academic writing is seen as less fixed and more dynamic and where meaning is the subject of discussion and negotiation.

The need now is to represent this in the way such writing is thought of and acted upon. How this is played out in the policies and functions of universities, faculties and lecturers is beyond the scope of this paper but provides a rich and exciting field.

REFERENCES

__ADDIN ENBib__


Trueba, H. (1990). "The role of culture in literacy acquisition: an interdisciplinary approach to qualitative research." Qualitative
Studies in Education 3(1): 1-13._