Applying Kasper and Petrello’s Nonjudgmental Approach to Navajo Students: An Examination

Yi-Wen Huang

Abstract
This article aims to examine the factors which must be taken into consideration before attempting to utilize Kasper and Petrello’s nonjudgmental approach to English composition classes at a small 2-year college in the American Southwest. The majority of the students there are Navajo. Navajo oral tradition and syntax are two important factors to consider before utilizing this approach. Instructors are suggested to understand Navajo culture including oral tradition and syntax and direct students to the differences and similarities between Western and Navajo rhetorical patterns.

Keywords
Navajo, oral tradition, syntax

Based on previous studies (e.g., Daly, 1978; Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981), students’ writing-related skills or performance, such as grammar, mechanics, sentence structures, seem to have a negative association with writing anxiety/apprehension (WA). Also, students’ past experiences with writing, such as teachers’ negative evaluations and over-focus on error corrections, are also associated with WA (Daly & Miller, 1975). In recent studies, authors seemed to have focused on such factors as students’ leisure reading (Lee, 2005), leisure writing and self-confidence in literacy (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011), or beliefs about writing (Sanders-Reio, Alexander, Reio, & Newman, 2014) in relation to WA and to seek an effective teaching pedagogy to alleviate WA, for example, utilizing a process writing approach (Bayat, 2014) or establishing a WA group incorporating a combination of Peter Elbow’s freewriting and therapeutic counseling approaches (Wynne, Guo, & Wang, 2014).

Results of previous studies (Daly & Miller, 1975) on WA that show that past experiences tend to associate with WA open the door to the application of Kasper and Petrello’s (1998) nonjudgmental approach due to the Navajo history of the Long Walk or the boarding schools (House, 2002). This nonjudgmental instructional approach emphasizes fluent and clear expression of ideas over linguistic accuracy (Kasper & Petrello, 1998), which is consistent with Allen’s (1982) teaching pedagogies for Native students, which state that “the student will appreciate the attention being given to his [or her] experience” (p. 60) by providing comments on how to improve the content of his or her writing instead of merely focusing on grammatical errors correcting with red ink, and “his [or her] writing will improve for that very reason. We all like and need a good listener” (p. 60).

In this article, I would like to examine factors that must be taken into consideration before attempting to utilize Kasper and Petrello’s (1998) nonjudgmental approach to English composition classes at a small 2-year college in the American Southwest. The majority of the students here are Navajo who are bilingual or speak English as a second language (ESL). Kasper and Petrello (1998) asked their community college ESL intermediate—and advanced—level students to write pre-course writing autobiographies “based on a model described by Sandman and Weiser (1993), asked students to describe a positive and a negative experience writing English and to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses as writers of English” (p. 179). The results were similar between the intermediate—and advanced—level students in that they offered similar anxious behaviors, expressed concerns over error, and did not have positive attitudes toward their abilities in writing.

In Sandman and Weiser’s (1993) study, their students were asked to “assess their own competencies as writers” (p. 18) by writing a autobiography at the beginning of a writing course. The results suggested that this assessment method is far better than the traditional diagnostic essay questions because it allows composition instructors to obtain students’

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personal accounts of their weaknesses and strengths as writers and their “prior writing experiences” (p. 22), and the students are able to “monitor, from the outset of the course, their own development as writers” (p. 21). Also, Sandman and Weiser stated that the writing autobiography is socioeconomically and culturally inclusive because students need to write their own writing experiences.

In MacGowan-Gilhooly’s (1991) study on ESL students’ progress in reading and writing in English using fluency, clarity, and correctness, respectively, from lower to higher levels as their goals for three levels of ESL courses, the results confirmed that almost 100% of the students passed the reading assessment test and more than 60% passed the writing assessment test. At the highest level of these three, teachers helped students to identify their “most frequently occurring” errors in their previous writing but not correct them for the students, who were expected to correct them themselves (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1991, p. 44).

In Thomas’s (1993) article, she mentioned that she asked her ESL students to write about their personal experiences such as childhood experiences, so they are empowered and feel that their ordinary experiences are worth writing about. Perl (1988) focused on the concept of “felt sense” or “inner voice” (p. 116) in the writing process, in which the writers compose what is on their minds. Based on my 6-year personal teaching experience with the Navajo college students, they seem not to have problems writing personal narratives; instead, when it comes to argumentative papers, the majority of them would have problems including a clear thesis statement in their essays. The reasons will be later discussed in this article.

Kasper and Petrello (1998) citing Bernhardt (1993), MacGowan-Gilhooly (1991), Perl (1988), Thomas (1993), and Beaven (1977), adopted “fluency and clarity of expression over correctness of form” and “nonjudgmental instructor feedback” (p. 181) as the main approaches to reduce students’ WA. They concluded that when we adopted a nonjudgmental instructional approach that emphasized the fluent and clear expression of ideas, WA decreased and writing performance improved. As the focus shifted from correctness to fluency and clarity, students took a more active role in learning how to write. (Kasper & Petrello, 1998, p. 184)

Kasper and Petrello (1998) stated that they responded to their students’ writing instead of correcting errors, by asking “task-orientated questions and/or by making task-orientated comments of the type recommended by Beaven (1977)” (p. 181). Beaven (1977) stated that there are three kinds of comments that are useful to create “a climate of trust” with students when commenting on their papers. These are the following: A teacher may “ask for more information,” “mirror, reflect, or rephrase the student’s ideas, perceptions, or feelings,” and “share with the student times when he or she felt, thought, or behaved in a similar fashion” (p. 139).

The results of Kasper and Petrello’s (1998) study suggested using this framework led to a reduction of students’ anxiety, led to an increase in both their confidence and performance, and led the students to adopt more active roles as writers.

Navajo is a tribe in which oral tradition—storytelling—is a major part of its culture. Eder (2007) described key storytelling practices: First the stories are transmitted orally (told) to children by elders, not read. Also, the stories offer Navajos models of how to live their lives and emphasize respectful relationships and proper responsibility to themselves, other people, and the environment. Finally, the stories often directly interact with nature.

Also, Eder (2007) stated that one of the major Navajo storytelling practices is its use of a cyclical structure. One of his interviewees, Henry Begay explained “how Navajos seek to get away from concepts like ‘beginning’ and ‘ending.’ Stories are repeated, and themes within stories recur” (p. 286). Based on Eder’s study, oral stories/narratives do not have a clear beginning and ending, and points within a story are repeated.

In Eder’s (2007) study, her informant stated that in Anglo’s stories, the structure is linear with a beginning, middle, and an end, but in Navajo culture, which is very different, four directions are involved and clearly indicated in many stories: first east, then south, west, and finally north with the resolution, and then back to the east. Unlike Western stories with a final lesson and conclusion in the end, in Navajo stories, the conclusion is not stated explicitly, and lessons appear and reappear throughout the story. When assessing Navajo students’ papers in English, instructors must be cognizant of this type of Navajo thought pattern or rhetoric.

In Western stories, thesis statements can be implied, similar to that of Navajo stories. However, in Western fables, a type of short story, lessons are expressed explicitly. On the contrary, in Navajo stories deriving from the oral tradition, main ideas are not explicitly expressed. Eder (2007) pointed out that in the Navajo’s stories, “[a]ll of these meanings and beliefs are implicit—nowhere are they explicitly stated as the morals that are usually presented in fables in the Western tradition” (p. 287). This might lead instructors to still not be able to find a thesis statement in Navajo students’ papers, especially when emphasizing including an explicit thesis statement within the introductory paragraph.

Eder (2007) stated that based on his qualitative study of Navajo storytelling practices, he found that the rhetorical strategies of Navajo stories include “the cyclic use of stories means that lessons occur throughout the story, not just at the end. Also . . . going through all four directions repeatedly, many stories include segments that are repeated several times” (p. 288). As mentioned earlier, the majority of my Navajo students do not have problems writing their personal stories; however, according to Eder, the structure/rhetorical
pattern between a Navajo and a Western narrative is different. I suggest writing instructors to utilize Western and Navajo stories in class and ask students to compare how the stories are written in both stories to help them recognize the differences and similarities and make them aware of the differences in organization or arrangements of ideas between Navajo and Anglo stories.

It is also important to bear in mind that some of the Native Americans may consider some stories to be personal, family property, tribally owned, or belong to the public (Toelken, 1998), and some to be season restricted (Eder, 2007; Toelken, 1998). After collecting Navajo stories for more than 43 years, Toelken (1998) wrote,

> Certain stories and songs are to be orally performed only at certain times of the year: during winter (that is, between the first killing frost and the first lightning stroke), during solstices, and during eclipses—moments that are defined by the larger movements of nature, not by the immediate agendas of humans. (p. 381)

As a result, when assigning personal narrative assignments, instructors should instruct Navajo students that they are only required to present information with which they feel comfortable and should avoid stories in light of applicable seasonal constraints.

Moreover, Eder (2007) summarized the primary features of Navajo oral tradition:

> Key aspects of the storytelling context include the oral tradition, the role of elders, the emphasis on honoring relationships (ké), interacting with the natural world, conveying meanings implicitly, and a cyclic model of life. These different aspects are related in many ways. For example, the way in which each sentence in a story can carry a lesson illustrates the principle of all things having a purpose as well as the implicit conveying of meanings and principles. (p. 288)

By understanding the rhetoric of Navajo stories, instructors can focus more on the differences between Western and Navajo rhetoric, which can improve their English writing without correcting them by telling them that their thinking (Navajo mental structures or rhetoric) does not make sense. Also, clarity could be an issue. Students’ main idea for the entire paper or each paragraph could be implicit, and there could be too many ideas in each paragraph; therefore, the instructor could become confused. Thesis statement, topic sentence, and essay structure/rhetorical pattern based on each genre should be emphasized when teaching Navajo students writing a college essay.

Having some insight of some primary Navajo historical events can also help instructors understand Navajo students’ culture and what Navajo education and identity stand for. Manuelito (2005) stated that there are four processes that construct self-determination in the Ramah Navajo community: “community-based planning, maintaining an awareness of self, being proactive, and persevering” (p. 80). Manuelito then stated,

> These processes have been evident since Hwéeldi, the Long Walk, and are still occurring. Each of the four processes of self-determination is represented as one of the four foundational posts in the metaphoric hogan [a traditional Navajo dwelling] . . . Like the building of a hogan . . . the construction of self-determination consists of these four processes. (p. 80)

Manuelito pointed out that these four processes of self-determination represent the historical event and these four posts of their traditional houses.

Manuelito (2005) also emphasized that “Navajo education is viewed as an important part of self-determination” (p. 81) which is “[r]epresented in the second hogan post—maintaining an awareness of self or ádééholzin—and based on ké, the honoring of relationships” (p. 81). Navajo education represents the second post of the hogan, meaning maintaining understanding of self and is based on valuing relationships through the concepts of self-determination in Navajo culture (Manuelito, 2005). Manuelito explained that “Navajo education involves a moral responsibility to self, others, and the environment (both animate and inanimate). Navajo identity is based on honoring all of these relationships” (p. 81), which represents Navajo culture and functions of Navajo stories in the oral tradition as noted by Eder (2007). By learning about Navajo culture and oral traditions and their functions, instructors might be better able to apply Kasper and Petrello’s (1998) nonjudgmental approach by asking task-orientated questions to establish ké, the relationships with Navajo students, and encouraging them to become active in their process of learning writing, which are associated with the key concepts of self-determination in Navajo education based on Manuelito.

Writing instructors also need to consider the syntax of the ESL students’ native language when grading their papers. Navajo syntax is subject-object-verb (SOV) with the verb appearing at the end of the sentence. Witherspoon (1977) emphasized that “Navajo language is dominated by verbs,” and he wrote that “I once conservatively estimated that Navajo contained some 356,200 distinct conjugations of the verb ‘to go’” (p. 48). Navajo verbs are very complex with subject pronouns and object pronouns inside them (Witherspoon, 1977). There is a fourth person pronoun in Navajo to represent avoidance of speaking for someone or controlling others’ actions (Witherspoon, 1977), which does not exist in English. When reading papers written by Navajo students of ESL, instructors should be aware of the Navajo syntax and take into consideration of the contents of the paper such as fluency and clarity by asking task-orientated questions addressed by Kasper and Petrello (1998).

As a result, when applying Kasper and Petrello’s (1998) nonjudgmental approach, instructors should consider Navajo students’ syntax and oral traditions, which are associated with
organization, grammar, and clarity in English academic essays. Instruction can be revised based on Navajo culture and language, especially in consideration of oral tradition and syntax, and by directing students to the differences and similarities between Western and Navajo rhetorical patterns; Navajo students could be able to improve their writing in English when instructors utilize using Kasper and Petrello’s nonjudgmental approach.

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