Jelena S. Runić
Johns Hopkins University
Peabody Institute
Liberal Arts Department

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: THE RHETORIC OF THE SELF IN L2 STUDENT WRITING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Abstract: This paper discusses problems raised by cultural differences with respect to self-narration and use of the first person in academic writing. Western culture most commonly views events from one’s own perspective (independent self), while Asian cultures typically position the self as part of the event (interdependent self) (cf., Markus and Kitayama 1991). The question asked then is how multilingual writers from East Asian cultures approach western academic prose and self-narration, especially in the context of today’s increased student mobility. In this paper, I propose teaching strategies

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1jrunic1@jhu.edu
2Some parts of this project have been presented at the following conferences: 9th Inter-Varietal Applied Corpus Studies International Biennial Conference 2018 (IVACS 2018): Corpus Linguistics: Languages, Communities, Mobility (University of Malta Valletta Campus, June 13-15, 2018), The Center for Language Research Conference (CLARC) 2018: Perspectives on Language Diversity (University of Rijeka, Croatia, June 8-10, 2018), Consortium for the Liberal Education of Artists (CLEA): Challenging Artists in Challenging Times: What’s Necessary and Sufficient (Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA, April 5-7, 2018), Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC): Writing Strategies for Action, (Houston, TX, USA, April 6-9, 2016), Tenth Annual Conference on the Teaching of Writing: Writing as Translation (University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA, March 27, 2015), The Ninth Annual Conference on the Teaching of Writing: Sounding the Silence, Countering Quietism (University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA, April 4, 2014), and the Northeast Writing Centers Association (NEWCA) Conference (Bryant University, Smithfield, RI, USA, March 1-2, 2014). In addition, some parts of the project have been discussed at various talks and guest lectures at the University of Banja Luka (Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina) on December 16, 2016, Columbus State University (Columbus, GA, USA) on April 7, 2014, and the University of South Dakota (Vermillion, USA) on April 2, 2014. I thank all of the audiences at these events for their comments and suggestions. My special thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their constructive feedback. All errors remain mine.
for raising awareness of the self-centeredness of U.S. prose with L2 student writers and writing instructors. Samples of low-stake writing assignments reinforcing the writer’s voice and the use of the first person are provided.

Key words: personal narrative, self-representation, interdependent self; teaching L2 writing

1. Introduction

This paper discusses some of the cultural challenges that second-language (L2) English writers from East Asia face in the U.S. classroom. These challenges arise due to different self-construals in Eastern and Western traditions. More precisely, in Western autobiographies, it is assumed that the focus of a writer’s narration is the individual him/herself (so-called individualistic or independent self). On the contrary, a number of studies have shown that writers from East Asia place the focus on the context in their autobiographies, be it the writer’s family, friends, or the environment more generally (Wang 2008, 2009, i.a.). The self in such a context is defined as collectivist or interdependent. Given a significant increase of student mobility for the past decade or so, more and more East Asian student writers have found themselves in the U.S. classroom, thus being expected to comply with the demands of American rhetoric. Such a state of affairs represents a challenge for L2 student writers, writing instructors, and for the field of composition and rhetoric more generally.

That the concept of individuality varies across cultures has been supported even by anecdotal evidence. Thus, Markus and Kitayama (1991: 224) report that parents persuading children to eat do so differently in the U.S. and in Japan. To illustrate, an American parent would say: “Think of the starving kids in Ethiopia, and appreciate how lucky you are to be different from them.” A Japanese parent would react differently by saying: “Think about the farmer who worked so hard to produce this rice for you; if you don’t eat it, he will feel bad, for his efforts will have been in vain.” Furthermore, research on differences in self-construction from the field of cultural psychology demonstrates that Asians, Asian-born immigrants, and Asian Americans are inclined to write different personal narratives from the ones composed by European Americans (Wang 2008, 2009, i.a.). Specifically, while

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3 “East Asia” refers to China, Japan, and Korea, in line with the meaning of “East Asia” in the literature of self-construals (see Nisbett 2003, i.a.). The main claims of the present study have been made while working with students from mainland China. The term “East Asia” is used for simplicity and consistency reasons, in accordance with the literature on the topic in question.
with the former group of writers the focus is on the context, the latter lays great emphasis on the individual him/herself.

This paper explores an original student essay written by a newly arrived undergraduate Chinese student and proposes strategies for teaching writing with students bringing the interdependent self into the U.S. classroom. These strategies mostly involve raising awareness of different self-construals by increasing the number of low-stake assignments in which the emphasis is on the writer’s voice. Such an approach facilitates inclusion of the interdependent self in western writing style while emphasizing the cultural variations concomitantly.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides an original student essay along with the assignment prompt. In the same section, I discuss higher- and lower-order concerns, while focusing on cultural differences and self-representation. These are explained in more detail in Section 3, and reflection upon relevant research is provided. Section 4 brings in implications for teaching and proposes strategies for dealing with different self-construals. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper, and indicates directions for future research.

2. U.S. Personal Narratives and L1 Chinese Writers

First language (L1) Chinese writers constitute a significant number of students among L2 English students in the United States. For the past ten years, there has been a steady increase of students originating from mainland China. According to the Institute of International Education, only in 2016-2017 itself, there was an 85% increase in the number of international students at U.S. colleges and universities, as compared to what was reported a decade before. Moreover, the Open Doors 2017 Executive Summary states that “China remains the top sending country” of international students in the U.S.4

In this section, I present differences in self-representation through an L1 Chinese student personal narrative, a common assignment prompt given at the beginning of an ESL composition course.5,6 The essay was written by a newly arrived

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4See the announcements by The Institute of International Education at https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2017-11-13-Open-Doors-2017-Executive-Summary
5Writing courses represent a standard requirement of the undergraduate curriculum in the United States. Such courses are part of a general education requirement, while the exact number of mandatory courses varies from institution to institution. It is quite common to have at least two required writing courses, typically writing seminars, and these are regularly offered by English, Composition and Rhetoric, Humanities departments, or other similar units.
6As pointed out by one anonymous reviewer, the discussion on differences in self-representation would be more detailed and thus reliable if a paper written by an American/Western student were
undergraduate student from China at the University of Connecticut, and it was the student’s first writing task in a U.S. classroom. In order to fully understand the student’s essay, first an assignment prompt requesting a personal narrative (an autobiography) is given, after which the student essay is presented in its entirety.

Assignment 1: Personal Narrative

Write a personal narrative about your educational and cultural background. In your paper, try to answer all of the following questions:

- What was your previous education back home?
- What was the reason you chose to study in the U.S.?
- In your own experience, what is the main difference in education between the U.S. and your home country?
- What expectations do you have from studying at a U.S. university?
- What are the biggest cultural challenges with respect to the U.S. educational system?
- What are your strategies for overcoming cultural challenges at UConn?

Student paper: L1 Chinese writer – 1st draft

All about my education

My life always seems normal, just like most of Chinese’s whole life. However, my parents decided to send me to the United States to receive the university education, then I have a precious opportunity to go abroad to accept knowledge.

Without any suspense, I experienced the education of primary school in my home place. Which is worth to pay attention to is that my parents sent me to a boarding school. Almost all of us cannot afford the week days in the school not only because of the homesick but also because of the strict teaching pattern of our teachers. But to the strictness of our teachers and the school, I always be forced to try my best. No doubt, I always get good grades during my primary school days.

included as well. This will certainly be taken into consideration in my future research, given that the current paper represents only a preliminary discussion.

The name of the course is ENGL 1003-01, 02 English for Foreign Students, and it was taken by the relevant student at the University of Connecticut, Freshman English Program (Department of English) in fall 2013. ESL composition courses commonly represent developmental courses in the undergraduate curriculum, and are requested for international students whose TOEFL score (or some other diagnostic tests) reveals results that are not in line with learning objectives and expectations of mainstream (non-ESL) courses.
Then I entered one of the best middle schools in our city to receive the following education. In the middle school, I had much more freedom than before. The teachers just gave us a lot of knowledge to absorb in the classes and we have to deal with our homework, which can reflect the degree of our acceptance of these contents. During that time, I felt little difficult to solve all the problems that I met. But I finally got good grades during the review time quantum.

After the senior high school education, I became a high school student. During this period, I finished new courses in the first and the second year. It is harder for me to remember and use knowledge in so many different fields at the same time than in the middle school. I just like a container which utilized to get knowledge. And until the third year, I finally been far away from such boring study pattern.

So far, I still believe that the decision of our family to let me study abroad is a perfect resolution. Firstly, the presenter of this idea is my father. My father tried to study abroad when he was young. Unfortunately he did not pass the relative process to go to USA for twice. And when I was about 8 years old, he went to Canada to serve as the visiting scholar. And he was attracted by the environment abroad again. And my mother also went to the USA when I was young. Both of them consisted that the conditions of the western universities are much better than Chinese. And referring to my own experience, I discovered that the most difference between Chinese university education and American university education is the model of teaching. Although in China, we always have strict pattern before come into the college, we needn’t to be very hard in order to complete our university education. But in America, we can learn a lot of skills from a variety of aspects rather than academic knowledge. Students must deal with their own schedule and put all effort to study to get good grades.

By the way, I want to talk about the expectation I have from the university life in the U.S. In order to approach my goal, I hope that I can have enough ability of control myself. Not only in the academic fields, I also wish that I can balance my own life. At the same time of study, I can insist to participate diversity of activities. I wish the wonderful environment of UCONN can provide me the chance to absorb full of academic knowledge and to have exciting daily life.

The above essay represents a challenge for both the student and the writing instructor for a number of reasons, and in the areas of both higher- and lower-order concerns. As for the higher-order concerns, first of all, the student makes claims

8In composition and rhetoric, writing errors are traditionally treated as higher- and lower-order concerns. Higher-order concerns are approached first by writing instructors and are considered more
without providing sufficient evidence. For example, in paragraph 5, lines 9-10, the student does not explicitly state what “variety of skills” the student can gain. Moreover, the essay lacks the northern American essay pattern with an introduction, body paragraphs organized around the main thesis, and a conclusion. Further, there are a number of grammar mistakes, at the various levels of grammar, key among which being word form, word choice, and errors at the sentence level.

Yet, one of the most striking features of the above essay is that the focus of the student writing does not seem to be the student herself although the prompt requests an autobiography. Somehow the focus seems to be on the student’s family, and even the student reveals herself that the decision to pursue to study in the United States was made by her father. From a cultural perspective, this is very different from a European American student writing whose focus would be on the student rather than on the context, and whose expectations would be to make a decision herself rather than to expect her family to decide on her behalf. For the sake of clarity, the properties of ESL student writing are given in the following table, bearing in mind higher-order concerns, lower-order concerns, as well as some basic cultural differences. These are listed in column 1, with some of the features in column 2. Examples illustrating the relevant points are given in the last column, column 3:

| Area                          | Feature                  | Example                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Composition & rhetoric        | lack of evidence         | paragraph 5: lines 12-13 “But in America, we can learn a lot of skills from a variety of aspects rather than academic knowledge.”    |
|                              | lack of organization     |                                                                                                                                        |

relevant. Some examples of higher-order concerns include errors pertaining to anything that interferes with the basic understanding of student writing, key among which being lacking evidence, organization, or logical connection of ideas more generally. Lower-order concerns, for their part, do not interfere with the understanding of the core student message to a large extent. Such is the case with grammar and punctuation errors, unless these severely impede the comprehension of the text, in which case they move to the area of higher-order concerns.
In the remainder of this paper, the emphasis will be placed on cultural differences in self-representation between East (East Asia) and West (United States), as reflected in the way in which the student places the emphasis on the context (her family) rather than on herself. First, I will reflect upon previous research on the concept of self (Section 3), after which a proposal for teaching in an L2 classroom along with its implications is provided (Section 4).

3. Differences in Self-Representation between East and West

There have been a number of studies showing that East Asians and Westerners differ with respect to self-representation. These studies have been primarily conducted in the areas of social and cultural psychology and anthropology, and the main focus has been a contrastive exploration of the subject’s focus and autobiographical memory. Whatever the exact field may be, almost every study contrasting the self-construal in Eastern and Western cultures shows that there are differences in how East Asians and Westerners perceive the world, and it has been widely assumed that these differences are linked to deeper differences in self-construction.

In their seminal work on divergent cultural self-construals, Markus and Kitayama (1991) drew a distinction between a self mostly attending to and defining him/herself from one’s own perspective, and a self being defined primarily in relation

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9 For a thorough exploration of the autobiographical self, conditioned by one’s time and culture, see Wang 2013.

10 This of course does not mean that every Westerner is individualistic and thus necessarily has an independent self-construal. Neither does it imply that every Asian person attends to others in positioning him/herself in the world, and thus has developed an interdependent self/view. Yet, in Nisbett’s own (2003: 77) words: “[V]ariations between and within societies, as well as within individuals, should not blind us to the fact that there are very real differences, substantial on the average, between East Asians and people of European culture.”
to others. Since the main focus of the self-construals is on how the individual views him/herself in relation to others, Markus and Kitayama coined the term “interdependent self” for the self that positions him/herself in relation to others, which is typically the case for Asian cultures. Likewise, they labeled the self that defines him/herself originating from the west as the “independent self”.

In a series of experiments, Wang (2008, 2009) demonstrates that Asians, Asian-born immigrants, and even second-generation Americans, Asian Americans, are inclined to write quite different autobiographies from European Americans. For Eastern writers, the focus of the writer’s autobiography is on the context, while Western writers believe that the proper focus of an autobiography should be themselves, and thus acted accordingly. Furthermore, the deep-rooted differences about the degree of self-focus have implications on the so-called episodic memory, a type of memory related to one’s own personal events. To illustrate, Wang (2009) conducted a study in which she requested that Asian-born and European American undergraduate students kept a journal for a week. After one week, the subjects took a test, a pop quiz, which was designed to elicit the subjects’ memory of personal events. The results of this study showed that European Americans recalled more events related to their own personal entries than did Asians, Asian-born immigrants, and Asian Americans. In brief, the major differences between Eastern and Western autobiographies are given in the following table, based on Wang’s research on self-construals and autobiographical memory:

|                     | European Americans | Asians and Asian Americans |
|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| focus               | individual (self-focused) | context (other-focused) |
| length              | long               | short                       |
| episodic memory     | strong             | weak                        |

Importantly, while there has been extensive research on the concept of self in the fields of cultural and social psychology, little is known about teaching personal narratives in the context of different self-concepts. I turn to this crucial point in the following section.

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11 See, however, Matsumoto 1999 and references therein for problems with the theory of independent and interdependent self, as put forth by Markus and Kitayama (1991).
12 The main focus of this paper is cross-cultural synchronic self in personal narratives. For other explorations of this concept, such as the connection between self and future event simulation, see Wang and Koh 2015. For the connection between culture, memory and identity, see Wang et al. 2017.
4. The Proposal: Strategies for Raising Awareness of Differences in Self-Representation in the L2 Classroom

Acknowledging that there co-exist very different self-construals in the classroom and in a culture whose self-representation is individualistic at its core nature, one crucial question arises: How much should we be inclusive with respect to the interdependent (East Asian) self in the independent (U.S.) classroom? It is worth noting that while we certainly should be inclusive with respect to cultural differences, at the same time there are course goals and objectives inspired by the U.S. (individualistic) culture. On the one hand, there is a growing number of students from China, bringing their interdependent self into the U.S. classroom. On the other, there are learning goals, objectives, and expectations headed by the U.S. standards in the field of composition and rhetoric. While no official standards are given as to how personal narratives should be written, it is assumed that the focus in autobiographies should be on the individual who writes such a narrative. To put it bluntly, the question then arises as to what kind of comments a writing instructor should provide, if any, to the student whose essay was presented in Section 3 above.\footnote{I refrain from providing a detailed framework on how to teach personal narratives in the L2 writing classroom, as such an ambitious task is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I propose several steps that help L2 writers from East Asia raise awareness of cultural differences with respect to self-representation between East Asia and the West. For a comprehensive model on how to teach narratives, including personal narratives, at least at the level of secondary education, see Hillocks 2007. For a relatively recent project on personal narratives conducted in partnership between high school teacher education candidates and first-year writing program students, see Juzwik et al. 2014.}

I believe that cultural differences in relation to the independent and interdependent selves should be addressed at two levels – at the level of teachers’ training (outside the classroom) and at the level of students’ education (inside the classroom). An awareness of these differences should become an integral part of a teacher’s degree program and preparation. Such knowledge could be obtained during the teacher’s education degree program, or as part of orientation training provided by a particular school/program at the beginning of the semester or academic year, or by multiple training sessions. Whatever the exact training format may be, a writing instructor working with students from East Asia should be aware of differences in self-construction between East and West and their implications for teaching. This awareness can be created by showing a larger sample of student essays to the instructors, so the writing instructor can be provided real examples of different self-construals and thus become more aware of the issue in question.
Simultaneously, writing instructors should address these differences in the classroom, so a better cultural adjustment for students from East Asia is made. For this task, the writing instructor could increase the number of low-stake assignments and informal writing both inside and outside the classroom, in which the focus is on the writer’s personal stance or experience.\textsuperscript{14} Below are two examples of such a task, in which the writer’s opinion and analytical writing are elicited:

**Examples of assignments reinforcing the writer’s opinion or point of view**

- Choose two-three English words or expressions that entered the vocabulary of your native language. Then explain briefly whether this is a good or a bad thing.
- Pick one of the mothers from the movie *The Joy Luck Club* (directed by Wayne Wang) and write down several sentences (2-3) uttered by the mother. Then explain briefly whether you consider the mother’s speech as “broken English.” Provide evidence for your claims.

Many more similar examples can be created, yet the most important point a writing instructor should bear in mind is that cultural differences of self are deeply ingrained, and that raising awareness of self-representation takes time and effort on both the part of the writer and the writing instructor. In that vein, I conclude this section with a “CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers”:\textsuperscript{15}

“[… we urge writing teachers and writing program administrators to recognize and take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes, to understand their characteristics, and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs.” (“CCCC Statement on Second-Language Writing and Writers,” p. 670)

5. Conclusions

This paper addressed self-representation with L2 English writers from East Asia, as reflected in their personal narratives. While Western culture views one’s self starting from the individual narrating the event, in Eastern culture writers position

\textsuperscript{14} Some examples of low-stake assignments include journals, freewriting, group writing, online discussions and the like (writing-to-learn activities).

\textsuperscript{15} The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) is a U.S. major professional association of college and university writing instructors.
themselves in relation to others, a dichotomy labeled as the interdependent self and independent self throughout this paper (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Student writers originating from Asia may focus on the context rather than on themselves as unique individuals, as is expected in Western culture. In order to promote awareness of these differences and become fully inclusive, writing instructors should receive training on the relevant topic. Likewise, L2 student writers originating from East Asia should become aware of this difference with the help of various informal writing tasks through which the writer’s point of view and perspective are reinforced. Future research should include a larger sample of student essays in order to determine the extent up to which L2 writers appeal to their original self-construal in Western-type personal narratives.

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IZMEĐU ISTOKA I ZAPADA: RETORIKA SEpstvA U Pisanju Na Drugom Jeziku I Implikacije U Nastavi Pisanja

Rezime

Predmet ovog istraživanja predstavljaju kulturološke razlike između istočnog i zapadnog načina pisanja autobiografije, te korištenja prvog lica. Dok je u severnoameričkoj kulturi, na primer, pripovedač autobiografije tradicionalno fokusiran na sebe i svoju perspektivu prilikom opisa i analize događaja (nezavisno sepstvo – “independent self” (Markus and Kitayama 1991)), to nije slučaj u naraciji pripovedača poreklom iz Kine, koji je čak i u autobiografskom žanru uglavnom fokusiran na okruženje – porodicu, društvo ili okolinu uopšte (zavisno sepstvo – “interdependent self” (Markus and Kitayama 1991)). Takve razlike u pripovedanju predstavljaju poseban izazov za sve veći broj stranih studenata poreklom iz Kine na severnoameričkim univerzitetima, u čijim su nastavnim programima kursevi pisanja obavezni. U ovome radu se analizira egocentričnost severnoameričke proze sa kojom se susreću studenti iz Azije i predlažu se strategije u nastavi pisanja koje bi pomogle predavaču da podigne svest o sepstvu severnoameričke proze. Predstavljeni su primeri pismenih zadataka sa naglaskom na prvo lice.

Ključne reči: autobiografija, naracija sepstva, zavisno sepstvo (interdependent self), nastava pisanja na drugom jeziku.