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THE STORY OF FINDING "MY IDEA" AND "MY VOICE" IN LEARNING TO WRITE AND READ IN ENGLISH OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

In compliance with the essential requirements of Vietnam in the new era of an open, global-oriented economy¹, in academia, undergraduate Vietnamese students are required to reach the standard of writing and reading academically in one foreign language. The emphasis is mostly on English because of its role as the most popular lingual franca at present. In education, one might question that how a Vietnamese could at the same time be at their root with Vietnamese learning values/traditions, but also take full advantages of the Western/Anglophone innovative learning approaches for reading and writing communicatively in Global English.

For me and my colleagues as teachers who have been working with Vietnamese undergraduate students in learning to read and write in English, we recognize some of the challenges mostly caused by historical and cultural background of the Vietnamese students in learning English. In writing, for example, producing a meaningfully written discourse in English requires a high cognitive effort of the students. The challenges they face are far from English-L2² word or grammar-related difficulties, but mostly by L2 genre conventions which are different from what they are used to in their L1³. In their L1 writing, they are expected to respect socially accepted points of view, traditional values of their culture and express their personal thoughts in reference to what other people in their community might think. Asian/Vietnamese learners are reported "to understand information only contained within the text, or that which is supplied by their teachers" (Pham, 2011, p. 1). On the contrary, academic English writing requires them to set their own stance and support their stance with their own perspective. Some innovative writing and reading pedagogies from the West such as the ones encouraging students' personal potential, autonomous learning, sharing knowledge could be applied in Vietnamese setting. However, as teachers in Vietnam, we assumed that the Asian/Vietnamese students' cultural differences should be taken into account in the application of the pedagogies. The practical use of the pedagogies in Asian/Vietnamese setting will, in its turn, validate and enrich the Western pedagogies.

Many studies of Western and Vietnamese teachers pointed out that there are differences between Asian/Vietnamese and Western learning styles. Vietnamese students, embedded in a larger Asian community, are required to convey reproductive

¹ See discussions of Vietnam role "Towards a united, strong and open ASEAN Community" in *Vietnam Investment Review*, August 2012.

² L2 is an abbreviation of second language.

³ L1 is an abbreviation of mother tongue.

knowledge in academic writing and reading and therefore, they could not go beyond the declarative knowledge stated in their course-book (Pham, 2011). Students get used to the method of teaching that tends to emphasize the memory of commonly accepted knowledge, named as *rote* learning. This is obviously contrary to a Western pedagogy that emphasizes activating students to make sense of new subject matters via connecting to their personal experience and criticizing from a personal perspective. The Western/Anglophone pedagogy might be more towards fostering personal potential of an individual than the mastery of recognized knowledge. In the present research project, we take into account the Vietnamese students' history and cultural background to design courses to enhance the students' potential in idea generation, voice expression, and written responses to literature in EFL⁴ academic writing and reading.

In the four sections below, we will start with a closer look at students' cultural conventions that might affect their quality of writing and reading academically in English. We assume that making clear the specific conditions of students will provide a clearer justification of our experiments on activating personal content and voice in academic writing and reading in Vietnamese EFL students. The second section will deal with our hypothesis in designing interventions on idea generation for Vietnamese students. The third section is about the plan to stimulate writing voice expression. The fourth is about the plan to encourage student engagement with EFL literary reading.

We expect, with the three studies on learning pedagogies, to contribute to the sensitivity, validity and inclusiveness of pedagogy, methodology and theory of L1 and L2 writing and reading research in the way that we apply what research found out on students whose English is not a native language.

2. CULTURAL CONTEXT OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

From the perspective of teachers and researchers in second language education we examine aspects embedded in Vietnamese culture that might affect Vietnamese students in learning to generate content and express voice in academic writing in English.

“When I look at a new topic, I do not have any idea to write [about] the topic and consequently my text is a boring and not a persuasive text.” (Linh, participant numbered 28 wrote down her problems in L2 writing in the first meeting of the study).

Student Linh, a Vietnamese EFL student, shared her problem when facing the writing task “writing for or against a crime punishment”, a task which is extracted from her Anglophone text book in EFL writing. It is not that she does not know something about the topic, but she has not learned or experienced that what she thinks individually is worth putting into text. Why is that?

⁴ EFL is an abbreviation for English as a Foreign Language.

2.1 Vietnamese academic writing

In secondary education in Vietnam, writing is used as a means to test writer students' mastery of accurate content of a literary work. Writing is not a subject per se; it is embedded in literature teaching. Linguistic features of mother tongue writing and discourse essays in simple and short forms, such as narrative and descriptive essays, are taught in lower education (primary, lower secondary level). In upper secondary and tertiary level, writing about aspects of literary stories such as writing on character(s) or discussing thematic issues of a story is required. How to write those literature-related academic essays, yet, is not taught in schools (Phan, 2011, p. 33). For example, the following two writing tasks are elicited from the Vietnamese National Exam of Secondary Education Graduation in June-2011: Task 1: Analyzing character Trang in the short story *Vo Nhat*⁵ [Gathered Wife] of writer Kim Lan; Task 2: Analysing the character Fishing Village Woman in the literary work *Chiec Thuyen Ngoai Xa* [Far Boat] of writer Nguyen Minh Chau⁶. In the two tasks, a writer is assessed through her ability in memorizing, articulating the existing knowledge of the typical character traits of the literary work and to structure that content in a traditional text form. So, with this contextually-embedded specific notion of academic writing, writers are not required to set up their own stance in an issue and to newly create and support their stance with their own arguments, but to focus on exposing reproductive knowledge. On the contrary, L2 academic writing places emphasis on writers' uniqueness, such as the writing task for student Linh above requiring the writer's own stance and supportive arguments. In conclusion, the argumentative writing genre and the writing conventions expected of that genre, which is closely related to Western/Anglophone cultures or settings, are far from the Vietnamese students' experience in their mother language writing.

2.2 Role of self-identity

In Asian communicative settings, an individual must be connected, related, and adjusted to other people of the community (Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, A., Horvath, Bresnahan, & Yoon, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Communicators must adapt themselves to their addressees (with respect to age, gender, relative social position of and relationship to the addressees). As an example from Vietnam, the self-adjustment in communication is reflected clearly with the constraint of choosing an appropriate form of self-reference in more than 11 first-person singular subject pronouns in Vietnamese communication, compared to the only one *đi* equivalent in English. In communication between students and teachers, for instance, Vietnamese students use the first-person singular pronoun *đem* (first-person singular pronoun used in the case a speaker addresses themselves as in a lower position than their in-

⁵ The extract of the story located in the 12th Grade Advanced Literature, Book Part II, Vietnam Education Publishing House-2008.

⁶ The extract in the 12th Grade Advanced Literature, Book Part II, Vietnam Education Publishing House-2009.

terlocutor(s); the students will never use the first-person singular pronoun *đôi* (pronoun equal to *đôi* in English).

2.3 Voice

In Vietnam, voice in communication is expected to be a voice of *đôi*, instead of a voice of an individual self. Communicators, in general, follow the values that are highly respected in the group and fear being ostracized personally (see more analyses of collectivism-culture communication behavior in Adler, 1997; Bosley, 1993; Kim et al., 1996; Meyer, 2003). It is certainly not the case that the communicators in a collectivist-cultural setting do not have their own voice and their own judgment, but that the voice and the judgment should be related and closely attached to what the group emphasizes. This notion of voice can be observed in a comparative study of L1 Vietnamese and L2 English writing of Vietnamese students of Phan (2001, 2011). L1 Vietnamese writers were characterized with being indirect, writing from a distance towards the topic, and an intention of being less straightforward and more sophisticated, whereas Anglophone emphasized being clear in statement, theme-driven reasoning and a strong sense of self-author (Phan, 2011, p. 30-31).

2.4 Teaching English as a Second Language in Secondary Education

Teaching writing in English as a foreign language in secondary education in Vietnam places emphasis on language knowledge mastery rather than language knowledge transforming or language for communicative purpose. The English writing pedagogy and assessment do not focus on facilitating writers to use language as a means to create a meaningful discourse, but is grammar-oriented instead. Teaching English centers on memorizing grammar structures, identifying grammatical errors in provided sentences, using subordinators/coordinators to combine two simple sentences, and on recognizing sentences/phrases similar to each other in grammatical structures or meaning. So, learning to write meaningfully in written discourse like essays is not included in the English learning program in secondary education.

To conclude, the above differences might account for the problems that the Vietnamese learners in EFL writing face in finding their own voice when performing a L2 writing task that requires writer's self-authority in idea and voice towards a controversial issue. The question of how to facilitate the students to construct their text authority is a challenge for EFL-teachers in Vietnamese universities.

3. PERSONAL IDEA GENERATION IN ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING: EXPERIMENT 1

L1 research considers the importance of prewriting strategies for activating idea generation in learner-writers. Some prewriting activities were reported as effective for idea generation: using a computer prewriting outline to generate and organize information (Channon, 2004), learning to use a graphic organizer for generating

ideas prior to persuasive writing (Thanhouser, 1994), and learning to use a story web for generating ideas prior to writing (Zipprich, 1995). In L2 writing, the question of what pedagogical instruments might activate effectively L2 writers to generate ideas and to translate the ideas into a final text composition needs further research investment. Silva (1993) reported from an empirical research results that in spite of L2 writers' higher devotion to idea generation and more time spending for figuring out the topic in the prewriting stage, they still did not make progress in generating useful material; and many of the generated ideas have never found their way into the written text. In an overview study of Cumming (2001) which synthesized research of learning to write in a second language from 1980s to 2001, not one specific research with findings on idea generation of L2 writers' composition process was reported. In 2008, Leki, Cumming and Silva (2008) reported six studies on second language writing that were grouped under the category of idea generation (see studies of Albrechtsen, 1997; Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Moragne & Silva 1989; Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986; Victori, 1999; Zamel, 1982, all cited in Leki et al., 2008). However, these studies were solely descriptive showing differences between skilled and less skilled L2 writers, how writers act differently when writing in their mother tongue and second languages, and the differences were related to idea generation quality. Very rare studies on interventions in idea generation were reported. In the recent review study of prewriting treatments of Byrd (2011), a study of Hornung (2000) on application of free writing as a prewriting activity for Italian students in L2-German writing indicated a greater number of important utterances, better coherence and more proper content, although not perfect German, in the students' summary texts. In general, little is known about what intervention facilitates the idea generation process of L2 writers.

Corresponding to Vietnamese culturally-embedded L2 writing challenges for Vietnamese undergraduate students in stance taking and idea generation towards an L2 argumentative writing task, we choose free writing as an activity to use in the prewriting stage. We take three main advantages of free writing as an idea generation activity. First, we assume this activity could probably boost ideas embedded in each person to come out. Therefore, the writers' personal stance, beliefs in an issue at stake, could be hopefully revealed through an act of personal free writing. Second, this unstructured, informal prewriting is expected to prevent as well as ameliorate writers' block caused by L2 formal language usage constraints. Further, research suggests positive effects of expressive writing on exploring personal knowledge of each individual: free writing as an explorative tool, activating knowledge embedded in each person (Elbow, 1973). Or, in other words, free writing might help to form new knowledge (see the discussion of Elbow, 1973, on free writing). However, in connection to the students' background that argumentative writing is a new genre, we assumed that before activating the free writing as an idea generation activity for argumentative composition, students need to be aware of the function and goal of the genre via a short analysis of function, goal, and approach of a sample text. Moreover, we expect this analysis could function as a framework to facilitate writers to select strategically ideas from the informal writing for setting up their own view-

point. The hypothesis is corresponding with the bonding tendency of text pattern knowledge and its efficacy in probing ideas and structuring text organization (Dymock, 2005; Englert & Hiebert, 1984; Reynolds & Perin, 2009). Finally, such analysis possibly helps writers to construct a strategy for relating their free writing to a formal later writing to enrich the quality of their persuasion. We expect that this phase of analysis will elaborate idea generation, as measured with (i) the length of free-writing text, (ii) the ideas in the free-writing text that writers perceived as relevant and important, and (iii) the real usage of the ideas in writing a more formal argumentative text. We enlarge the examination of effects of sample text analysis on productivity, quality of final text, and self-efficacy of students. The hypothesis corresponds to the findings of other studies on the positive effects of providing students with specific goal setting awareness on their writing quality (see studies of Ferretti, MacArthur, & Dowdy, 2000; Graham, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1995; Page-Voth & Graham, 1999; Schunk & Swartz, 1993).

4. VOICE EXPRESSION IN ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING: EXPERIMENT 2

Writing researchers have been attempting to formulate specific concepts of voice and identity in writing. These conceptions range from *voice* as an attribute that captures the sound of the individual on the page (Elbow, 1981, p. 287) to a more sociocultural definition of Matsuda (2001) *voice* is the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language user [appropriately], deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoire (p. 40). Writing research on voice has been designed to address the question of how voice is revealed in writing. Hyland (2011) examined how scholars carved a sense of their self within disciplined discourse in writing academic homepages. Hyland (2010) compared the frequency of language features representing voice of the two leading researchers in applied linguistics, Debbie Cameron and John Swales, to trace back to their identity construction. Ivanic (1998) and Ivanic and Camps (2001) reported how voice of author, e.g., self-confidence, certainty or depersonalization, was revealed through analyzing lexis, generic reference, evaluative lexis, and syntax of students' texts. Tardy and Matsuda (2009) reported clues, e.g., breadth or depth of knowledge (or lack thereof), choice of topic, the author's representation of the field, and description of the research setting, that journal reviewers in a blind review process used in guessing who the author of an academic paper is (e.g., guessing the level of author's experience in the field, the author's language background or the author's nationality). Other researchers compared how L1 and L2 writers were different in the usage of rhetorical and linguistic features such as first person singular, transitivity, lexical choice, or deductive versus inductive organization (Helms-Park & Stapleton, 2003; Hinkel, 1999, 2002; Hyland, 2001, 2002b; Tang & John, 1999; Wu & Rubin, 2001). Although the studies reveal what voice is and how voice could be found in texts, it is unclear how authentic classroom instruction may stimulate voice expression of second language novice writers in a learning context where they

are mostly assumed to possess a different perspective on voice in their L1 native writing.

From research literature, two prewriting activities that might generate content and consequently enhance the quality of argumentation are free writing and group discussion. Free writing was reviewed as an effective tool for generating contents which were sometimes even new to L1 writers. So, in other words, free writing might help to form new knowledge (see the discussion of Elbow, 1973, on free writing and idea generation and Hillocks, 1986, on free-writing treatment and text quality). Group discussion and its positive effects on idea generation was discussed in various empirical studies: effects of text-centered discussion on higher-order thinking and critical literacy (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006), of classroom discussion on development of subject knowledge and understanding (Corden, 2001; Reznitskaya, Anderson, & Kuo, 2007; Weber, Maher, Powell, & Lee, 2008), and of discussion and arousing multiple viewpoints on complex issues and problems (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999).

In a Vietnamese context, the two activities might not only affect the number and quality of ideas, but also the stance of an author towards his readers/addressees. As connected to the introduction above, de-emphasis of personal ideas and stance and respect of group values are conventional behaviors in Vietnamese communication. Therefore, we assume while free writing might facilitate writers to seek their own voice (Elbow, 1973), group discussion might soften the writers' personal voice in addressing an issue at stake. Two hypotheses were constructed. The first hypothesis is that free writing results in a more personal voice in argumentative text, compared to group discussion. However, in free-writing condition, arguments are generated by students individually, without being shared in a peer group; that might affect the author-content relation in students' texts. Therefore, we come to the second hypothesis: free writing results in more indirectness in argumentative text, compared to group discussion.

5. ENGAGEMENT WITH READING ENGLISH-WRITTEN FICTIONS: EXPERIMENT 3

ōStudents read but did not understand; most read and understood parts- not all. In brief, they mostly stop at the surface, not the deep meanings of the [literary] workō

Above is a comment of a teacher who has taught EFL in higher education in Vietnam for 20 years and the EFL literature introduction course for the recent 3 years. In an effort to activate reader-based making meaning of fiction story for Vietnamese students, we examined whether the learning activity of self-questioning could encourage students' engagement with reading literary fiction.

5.1 Context of students: text-based processing approach in native and foreign literary reading

In Vietnam, Literature is a compulsory, separate subject in secondary education in the public school system, from grade 6 to grade 12. In these classes students read Vietnamese authors and foreign ones such as *‘The Magic Brush’* of a Chinese author, *‘The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish’* of a Russian author, extracts of *‘Don Quixote’* from Spain, *‘The Little Match Girl’* from Denmark, and *‘The Last Leaf’* of North-American origin, Shakespeare drama, etc., all translated into Vietnamese. However, Vietnamese literary works take the most part in the program (about 80%), with Vietnamese prose fiction taking a larger portion than poetry. Students throughout the whole country, for each grade, have been using the same course book in the public education system. The major aim is that students master central themes of the major literary works, the Vietnamese canon. In classrooms, students read a short story individually with guiding questions provided in the course-book. Then the teacher leads the whole-class discussion in order to answer the guiding questions for exploration of the theme of the story. Testing consists of reproductive questions about background of the author and about the story, and a writing task in which students write around 250-300 words analyzing the central theme of the story. Assessment of the writing task is based on the students expressing the *‘right’* theme and providing sufficient and appropriate evidence from the story; most of them are provided in the classroom discussion and therefore reproductive.

When the students graduated from the secondary system, if they chose English as a foreign language (EFL) four-year training course at undergraduate level, they must take an English-written literary reading course, a compulsory subject in the last year of their Bachelor program. At this level of proficiency in English, students are assumed to be proficient enough to understand literary works written in English. The EFL literary reading program includes complete works or extracts from American, English literary canon such as *‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’* of Hemingway, or an extract from *Hamlet* of Shakespeare. The teaching approach is that teachers pose questions about story’s characters, theme and lead classroom discussions to answer the questions.

The students in the foreign literary reading context are reviewed as showing a notable lack of comprehension in foreign language literary reading. Students usually ask *‘Why don’t you tell me what I should grasp, what the main contents of the story [L2 story] are?’* (interview material, October, 2011). This attitude reflects the present status of foreign language literary reading at university level. Vietnamese students prefer to seek a *‘right’* answer from teacher as well as show a resistance to investing into exploring deeper layers of literary texts, like students in other places (Janssen, 2009). Testing consists of questions about basic characteristics of a story like time, place setting, intentions of characters, etc. and a writing task in which students write around 250-300 words responding to the story they read. For example, students are required to stand in the character’s situation and figuring out what they are going to do. Or students must interpret the global theme of the story, state what they learn from the story, and produce the *‘moral’* which is not only typical in Viet-

name literature education, but also in foreign language literary reading. Assessment of the writing task is based on students' quality of interpretation of a story, whether it is more or less valid and reasonable, and taking language use and language expression also in consideration.

We assume, at this level of reading and life experience of students, a teaching approach that encourages reader-based processing, in comparison to traditional approach of teacher-posed questions, might be more interesting, challenging and fostering personally cognitive and affective engagement of the readers. Learning to generate questions (self-questioning) is a good candidate to enhance involvement.

5.2 Self-questioning and students' cognitive and affective engagement in literary reading

Three theories underlie the integration of students' self-questioning as a reader engagement strategy in literature classrooms: narrative understanding, problem finding, and reader response (Janssen, 2002). In *narrative understanding* theory, a fundamental component is that readers ask themselves questions. These questions occur as inner speech (self-talk) or as thinking aloud (Olson, Duffy, & Mack, 1985; Trabasso, Van den Broek, & Liu, 1988; Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994). The theory of *problem finding* suggests that reading literary text is a *problem-finding* rather than *problem-solving* process. As in literary texts, the problem itself is unknown, ill-defined, and pleasurable to be sought: therefore, it involves discovering, envisaging, and delving into deeper questions (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Schraw, Dunkle, & Bendizen, 1995). In *Reader-response* theory, reading is a transaction process between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1978). In the process, readers' genuine, knowledge-seeking question will promote their engagement, which in turn leads to higher levels of response to literature (Hynds, 1990; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). In sum, students' generating questions while reading to create sense is the basis of all the three theories.

There are different approaches in engaging students in literary reading through intentional application of self-questioning strategies: corresponding to the theory of *narrative understanding* is the approach of story-grammar based self-questioning of Singer and Donlan (1982). They explicitly taught students common characteristics of the grammar of a story and students were encouraged to generate more specific questions about the story's grammar while reading. They found students generated the adjacent story-specific questions "Is this story going to be more about the officer or the barber?" in accompany to the schema-general question "who is the leading character?" Students who formulated story-specific questions showed a better awareness of the story characteristics than students who read to answer the schema questions posed by the teacher.

Commeyras and Sumner (1998), whose study was in line with *Reader-response* theory, investigated what process enabled the transfer of responsibility from teacher to students for creating a meaningful and interesting dialogical discussion towards a short story for second-grade students. They asked students to think of open-ended

questions for a story and bring up the questions for group discussion. They found that giving students opportunities to think of questions for discussion, instead of answering teachers' questions, created an active discussion. Students' questions were reported as leading to critical thinking and problem solving.

Janssen, Braaksma, and Couzijn (2009) showed that for Grade 10 students who were stimulated to generate questions and discuss questions in groups reported a higher level of appreciation of the story they read in the post-test than students who read with questions provided by teachers. These authors also reported that students who did not receive the good and weak examples of questions showed better quality of interpretation than students of the guided self-questioning groups.

In sum, self-questioning seems to be effective to engage students in reading literary texts. However, depending on the level of students, teachers should be aware of the authenticity of a self-questioning classroom; for example, questions students generated should be addressed or explored in classrooms. Although not all questions could be answered, the ones that students had should be discussed or explored in an exploration session.

With the present study, we developed two measures of readers' cognitive and affective engagement by (1) qualities of students' written response to literary fiction and (2) an inventory of perceived engagement with literary reading. The first is for teachers' measure of students' engagement; the second is for the students' measure of their own engagement in fiction reading. The two measures reached an appropriate level of reliability.

To facilitate student engagement with reading fiction texts, we designed an intervention with two approaches of self-questioning. Self-generation of questions and discussing the questions with peers or exploring the questions individually form the principal components of the interventions. We choose discussion and individual free-writing as two activities for exploring the questions generated by students. The positive effect of students' discussion of the questions they generate in group on a higher level of reading engagement or appreciation is reported in some studies (Health, 1991; Guthrie et al., 2004, 2012; Janssen et al., 2009). We also think that bringing the questions students formed while reading to group discussion might contribute to the authenticity of a self-questioning classroom: questions formed and addressed. Another approach is free writing, in which students write to answer one of the questions they generated while reading the texts. This is based on the concept of free writing as an explorative tool to activate knowledge embedded in each person (Elbow, 1973). Researches on writing reveal that writing does not only function as a way of communication but a tool for acquiring content knowledge, developing understanding, and improving thinking skills in a broad range of content subject from science to literature and at various educational levels (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2011). With the two self-questioning approaches, group discussion and free writing, we want to address the basic question whether students do engage more deeply in fiction reading with self-questioning while reading than with teacher-posed questions.

6. OVERVIEW

In the following three chapters we will report a series of three intervention studies on content generation, voice expression in argumentative writing, and on cognitive and affective engagement with fiction reading in English of Vietnamese students. Chapter 2 addresses the issue of activating students' brainstorming in argumentative writing (experiment 1). Chapter 3 reports the effect on voice of two prewriting strategies, free writing and group discussion (experiment 2). Chapter 4 deals with the activation of students' self-questioning while reading and effects on their cognitive and affective engagement with fiction reading (experiment 3). Chapter 5 is the overall discussion in which we summarize the main results from the three studies and connect these to a comprehensive assessment of their contribution to research on EFL writing and literary reading and implications for teaching.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are each written as self-standing studies with the full problem statement, method, findings and discussions that might be an advantage when reading the chapters separately; however, for the other readers who read the whole book they might experience some repetition of the problem statements of Asian/Vietnamese students.