

The title of the submission **The teaching and the learning of EFL writing at secondary four level in Hong Kong – two case studies**

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Presentation format **Paper presentation – student papers (research by students)**

Abstract of the proposed paper presentation: The teaching and the learning of EFL writing at secondary 4 level (public examination level) in Hong Kong– two case studies

The proposed conference paper aims to address the following questions:

- What were Hong Kong secondary four students' perceptions of the teaching and the learning of EFL writing?
- What were the teachers' beliefs about the teaching of ESL writing at this level?
- How did the teachers' beliefs about the teaching of ESL writing and the students' perceptions of the learning of ESL writing interact to create a learning environment?

This is part of a D.Phil. project that investigated how teachers and students at different levels of secondary education interacted to create a learning environment in the ESL writing classrooms. Useful for the present discussion is the notion of “bi-directionality” in teacher-student influence in the classroom, borrowed from Shavelson, Webb and Burstein (1986) by Cooper and McIntyre (1996). Cooper and McIntyre (1996) summarized the concept of “bi-directionality” as being “concerned with the ways in which the teachers' strategies and behaviour influence their teachers” (p.116). The notion provided a framework within which the evolution of the learning environments being studied, or the lack of it, will be analyzed. In the discussion, the teachers' and the students' data will be brought into a shared light for the purpose of comparing how their concerns converged or differed so that we could come up with tentative answers to a question that should be of concern to educators –

why did the teachers enact, and the students experience, what basically was a similar curriculum so differently?

The composition sessions in two secondary four classes, one from a school with more able intake and another with less able intake, were observed over a period of an academic year. Both systematic observation and marginal participant observation were used to strike a balance between “taking a broader look at everything” and “taking a closer look at something.” The teachers and two students from each class (one perceived by the teacher to be more able and the other less able) were interviewed. Questions probing their perceptions of the composition classes, the teachers’ beliefs about the teaching of ESL writing, the students’ writing behaviours were asked. The data were then scrutinized for prominent themes and inferences made about the connection between the teachers’ beliefs and the students’ perceptions.

The findings suggest that a high degree of convergence between the teachers’ beliefs and the students’ perceptions was more likely to occur when the focus was on expectations, such as when they were dealing with the criteria of good composition or the priorities set for the particular contexts concerned.

When the issues concerned pedagogy and the writing tasks, however, more conflicts were discernible. This can be seen in the students’ covert challenges to the teachers’ conception of ESL writing at secondary 10 level. In the more able class (M4), it, according to the teacher, was essential for the students to learn to tackle different genres with the examination requirements foremost in their mind. However, there were numerous instances when the students adopted strategies at variance with the teacher’s recommended ones and the teacher lamenting her students’ inadequacies. Two questions were generated from the observation: Were the task-tackling strategies

opted for by the students necessarily a manifestation of the kind of inadequacies that the teacher saw in their performance? In what ways were the students' preferred strategies a reaction to their own reality of ESL writing at this level? In the less able class (C4), the task facing the teacher was to move her students beyond their concerns over the composition length and generating just basic content. The students' obsession with word number stemmed from their partial mastery of the English grammar, which made expression of their ideas difficult. As a response, the C4 teacher prepared her students for the grammar required for the topics they were assigned and helped them to build up the content from scratch. Yet the persistent nature of the students' problems seemed to testify to the fact that there was no easy solution. The students had to master the basic skills before they could have a firm grasp of the more advanced skills. This left us with the question of whether the attention to more basic skills got in the way of the introduction of the more advanced ones.

The proficiency levels of the students also seemed to bear on how much agreement / disagreement there was between the parties. On the whole, the more proficient students were more reactive to issues at both the teaching level and the task level, whereas the less proficient ones were more receptive and unquestioning of the teacher's instruction. In the more able class, thus, the students seemed to perceive the teacher's focus on rules and prescriptions as being inadequate and would prefer to experience the application of rules and prescriptions with the help of teacher demonstration. In the less proficient class, however, the importance of surviving the public examination means that it was an uphill struggle for the teacher to inculcate a culture of independence or autonomy by way of withholding unnecessary support. It inevitably raised the question of whether her students were ready for the plunge from

total dependence on the teacher to semi-independence in the shape of a more critical attitude towards what was given.

It is hoped that an awareness of the teachers' beliefs about the teaching of ESL writing and an understanding of their students' perceptions of the ESL writing enterprise at the public examination level will ultimately:

- help ELT practitioners to examine their beliefs more critically
- enable them to respond to their charges' needs more flexibly, to tap their resources more effectively and to exploit the present boundaries imposed by the public examination to encourage good writing practices.

References

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