



Composition Teachers from Different Cultures: Where is Pedagogy?<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract

This paper combines pedagogical reflection and composition theory research to offer new knowledge and advance the discussion of a significant multidisciplinary issue related to international teaching assistants (ITAs). It highlights the challenging experience of teaching composition in the United States upon these teachers' new entry to the country and its culture. It argues that there are teaching experiences that merit more attention as fresh, international teachers are increasingly joining US institutions and making it to the composition classroom, without having already been engaged in a pedagogical dialogue that facilitates their task. By sharing his personal experience and surveying other teachers, the author opens a forum to listen to these teachers as they express anxiety, embarrassment, and pressure due to facing cultural differences without having enough exposure to their students' prior knowledge. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to call attention to similar (global) situations and to receive scholarly evaluation and solutions from experts in the field. The proposed solution is to start a pedagogical dialogue that

responds to these cultural issues by providing creative support to make differences a source of empowerment to teachers and students alike.

*Keywords:* International Teaching Assistants, Cultural Literacy, Composition Theory, Pedagogy

### Introduction

The focus on students in the field of teaching composition seems normal and expected. Yet, neglecting the teacher should not go unnoticed. Race, gender, and class have repeatedly occupied the academic discussions in composition conventions and publications. The racial and class backgrounds of the students always need examination, but an exchange of ideas concerning teachers from different races or different cultures should not be less important. When the teacher of composition comes from cultural backgrounds different than those of his colleagues and students, there seems to be a pressing need for pedagogical discussions concerning such a situation. As a composition teacher, coming from Syria and teaching in the United States, I belong to the category of international composition teachers, those who work as teaching assistants while perusing their graduate degrees in US universities. I call for incorporating these teachers in the mainstream pedagogy of composition, by admitting and postulating that they are the struggling force of composition teachers, even if their discomfoting struggle is unseen or unrecognized. I take cultural literacy as an example of the challenge that international teachers face in composition classrooms, where they are supposed to involve their students in the basic types of literacy. When it comes to cultural literacy, the international teacher is left alone without any theoretical guidelines. I attempt to raise a question: can a composition teacher take the task of teaching cultural literacy when he or she is from a different culture? The absence of theorizing voices that address the problems of international teachers makes it hard to answer such a question. Thus, I attempt to demonstrate this issue based on my former experience as an international teaching assistant (ITA) during my first years of graduate study in the United States. I have studied composition theory which, as I will show, could not rescue teachers like me.

### First-Hand Experience and Cultural Encounters.

One year after the events of 9/11, I left my work in Kuwait and came to the United States to complete my graduate education in a small rural university in the Midwest. After one semester, I found myself required as a graduate teaching assistant to teach two first-year composition courses at a rural state university in the Midwest. My students would be Americans by culture and education, mainly from white, rural, and middle class backgrounds. I start attending the composition teaching workshops during the two weeks before the academic year started. I noticed that the workshops provided essential pedagogical instructions for the American teachers whose students have the same race, class, and cultural background. The exception was a few Eastern European and three Syrian teaching assistants.

By requiring all new international students to take an introductory course, the University's Office of International Education was the only place in charge of providing some cultural literacy to ITAs. The course was designed for all new international students, freshman, transferring, and graduate students. It did not address the fact that some of those students would be teaching composition, but neither of the composition workshops addressed such an issue. In dealing with texts, ideas, and experiences, a writing course is not like other courses, such as math or chemistry, where differences between the teacher's culture and his/her students' do not have an impact on the learning process. Surprisingly, there was no material in the composition workshops or in the major of the literature produced in the field, that address the special need of cultural orientation that would help ITAs to know the expectations of their students. Instead, my situation was similar to that described by an Arabic poetic proverb: "Thrown tied in the sea but yet told: Watch out for water!" I found myself in the teaching classroom tied by my cultural differences, which caused some limitations related to my interaction with my students, some of whom saw me more as a stranger than a teacher.

However, just like my fellow non-American teaching assistants (TAs), I headed to the classroom without sufficient amount of cultural literacy or the background of proverbial knowledge that could enable me share with my students all the funds of information that they gained by everyday learning and practice. Thus, upon recognizing that I was a newcomer to their

cultural zone, the students were always ready to investigate mine. Their immediate curiosity was about how it looked like “there” and what shocked me culturally here in the States. As I speculated later, some of them stretched their curiosity to question why they were taught English (as they call the class) by someone who was not like their high school teachers.

When I went to teach in the composition classroom, I did not find a match between my educational background in English and my non-English cultural capital, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terms. My familiarity with American society was gathered from literature texts, movies, CNN, Time, and other global (Western) media outlets. Nevertheless, I thought that I was ready to integrate myself into the social structure of the American society. What I mean by integration is the readiness to “fit” in the society without leaving my culture out. This integration is the same as John W. Berry (1980) describes as he discusses acculturation and adaptation, the maintenance “of cultural integrity...to become an integral part of a larger societal framework. Therefore, in the case of integration, the option is to retain cultural identity and move to join the dominant society” (p.13). Indeed, from the beginning, I knew that integration was not a simple task, considering the fact that American history is known to the world mainly in terms of colonization followed by independence, slavery followed by freedom, and racism and discrimination followed by equal rights movements. These historical shifts create mixed expectations for my own integration into American society, for though it seems a simple democratic one, this society has historical and social factors shaping its melting pot. The complexity of the modern American society intensifies when one encounters the fact that many American intellectuals are disappointed by the structure of the society. Suffice it to mention David Shipler’s (1997) *A Country of Strangers*, which argues that this society is determinately shaped by class and power. This structure of American society affects any attempt by an “outsider” to integrate himself or herself into the society. These were only concerns that my integration would not be easy and, therefore, teaching was a challenge.

I thought that the fragmentary information about the American society, its formation, icons, or even the people one might have met outside the borders of the United States, would provide me with common grounds with my students. Nevertheless, the true test for me was when I walked into that classroom that had about twenty five students staring at me and making me, later, realize how culturally and socially I was alienated. Even my so-called authority as a teacher could be easily questioned by students who might have thought that it was given to the “wrong”

person, someone who is not American or part of the political system. I realized that students could take advantage of their majority. From the first day, I realized that students could have taken advantage of my language performance in some awkward moments of expression or pronunciation. Yet, they did not, perhaps because they were convinced of the theoretical knowledge of their non-native composition teacher, as well as his credentials. My students could find an area where they had the upper hand over their teacher. This area was culture, where I admittedly felt uncomfortable and ill-prepared.

I started to wonder: how could I be the typical composition teacher whose goal of developing critical thinking comes as a result, and part of, engaging students with cultural literacy. In fact, I found Paulo Freire's (2004) theory about the pedagogically oppressed applied reversely in my case. "If on the one hand I cannot adapt or become 'converted' to the innocent knowing of oppressed groups, on the other, I must not, if truly progressive, arrogantly impose my knowing upon them as the only true knowing" (p. 64). I did not have the position of a referential authority. On the contrary, the students themselves became my cultural referential. I could not be the only "true knowing" type of teacher, simply because my students were the true knowing of the culture to which I was (and still am) new. Contrary to the situation that Freire wants pedagogues to avoid, teachers whose students become their cultural referential authority cannot expect their students to be their "oppressed" groups.

Expectations are misleading here. I started the profession as a teacher of English in countries (Syria and Kuwait) where English is taught as a foreign language. Teaching composition was a foreign area for me and, as if that were not enough, I was entering the composition classroom as a foreign person. The teaching practicum, as well as the composition and rhetoric courses I was taking at the time, made me more familiar with the discipline as a subject matter. However, such courses could not create familiarity between me and the people I was teaching. I felt alone in the world of teaching: the theories I read about teaching composition, the English department which provided me with the position and the administration, and the American fellow TAs, all assumed that my problems as a teacher were just like those of anyone else. Only my students were ready to show me that I was totally different from any teacher who shared their culture. I did not have a cultural shock in the non-academic American society, but all

my cultural shocks, with the pressure and pain associated with them, occurred in the American academic classroom where I was teaching.

I still remember the day when I was going over the topics that my freshman students chose for their research paper. I was responding to their topics by giving them some suggestions or some questions to consider. Everything was going fine until one of my students told me that she was going to write about Dr. Seuss. I asked her who Dr. Seuss was, and the student, as well as the rest of the class, thought I was joking. But I was serious! Neither during my childhood nor during my first year had I heard about what I later realized to be the most famous author for children. When I look back now at that incident I realize that both my students and I had a mutual cultural shock; they could not believe that I did not know Dr. Seuss. Hardly could they believe that the only person who did not know anything about a certain cultural topic (or icon) was the teacher. One can imagine how hard it was to be that teacher!

I call it *Dr. Seuss's incident*, and every time I reflect on this incident I realize that it was one of the turning points in my teaching career. Dr. Seuss's incident showed me that a teacher can be reduced to a humble learner by the same people he teaches. Dr. Seuss's incident exposed the huge gaps between students and their teachers who are from a different culture. These gaps cannot be measured or filled in a methodical or organized way as long as we keep silent about them. Dr. Seuss's incident gave me the insight that I was new to my students' culture, and they were obviously new to mine. Their knowledge of my culture was mere stereotypes and images of "otherness." When I look back at Dr. Seuss's incident, I realize that I might have given some students the justification to be like those bell hooks (1994) once had: "Certainly many white male students have brought to my classroom an insistence on the authority of experience, one that enables them to feel that anything they have to say is worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion" (p. 81). Maybe I felt from that moment on, these students, more than ever before, could not only challenge my authority, but could also assume that I had none. At a certain point, I speculated that I unwittingly revealed my ignorance of what seemed to be an essential part of their culture. I also thought that I would be digging my own grave if I continued showing more of this ignorance, which was more shocking to them, it seemed, than theirs to me when they would reveal to me later that they did not "have a clue" about what the United Nations was.

### International Teachers Speak Out

When surveying some international composition instructors who are teaching or taught in different academic settings across the United States and are from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds, I received personal testimonials and results that express the same concerns. As Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Agnieszka Tuszynska, is an international teacher from Poland who has a similar experience to share. She narrates that she once chose for her composition class a film demonstrating that masculinity is a social construct, and that American culture's production of violent masculinity implies that it is the social norm. According to Tuszynska (2011) she showed the film<sup>ii</sup> in 2005 but "warned the students that the film was from 1999, and that some popular culture examples it uses may seem a bit dated, but were still relevant" (personal communication, October 12, 2011). When the narrator of the film listed some male cultural icons as examples of "healthy" images of masculinity, Mark McGwire, a baseball star, was one of them. When the narration started to glorify McGwire as a noble hero, her students erupted in laughter. As she explains, it turned out that "the player had just been asked to testify in a big steroid use case and refused to testify under oath. And there went the movie's legitimacy in my students' eyes! I, of course, was blissfully unaware of the scandal having ever taken place" (Agnieszka Tuszynska, personal communication, October 12, 2011).

When asked if she felt that the pedagogical preparation provided to her by the university where she taught was sufficient to address the cultural differences between her and her students, Tuszynska pointed out that her own situation may have been unique due to the amount of exposure to American culture prior to her moving to the US. Even though she argued that there was not any "shortcut" to overcoming cultural difference and assumed that "real-life experience and trial-and-error" to be the only way, she also recognized that most ITAs may experience that the training they receive is deficient in bridging cultural differences (Agnieszka Tuszynska, personal communication, October 12, 2011). In her opinion, her home department, English, was efficient in training the new graduate instructors "as teachers during a week-long orientation. However, given the time limitations and the huge number of international students spanning a variety of cultures, little can be accomplished in the way of "filling someone in" on American culture" (Agnieszka Tuszynska, personal communication, October 12, 2011). If pressed to point

out one thing that she thinks ITA training sessions could do better, Tuszynska has the following advice:

I'd say they should prepare us better for the likelihood of encountering culture gaps, and advising about the strategies to deal with those gaps. I think it may be surprising to some ITAs how heavily and how often interactions with American college students rely on cultural, and especially pop culture references. I think being ready for that may somewhat ease the embarrassment and anxiety such misunderstandings may cause. The expectation of such situations would allow ITAs to think of ways they may react—for example, react with humor— before a situation occurs. (Agnieszka Tuszynska, personal communication, October 12, 2011)

She acknowledges that she is aware of most cultural references, with a notable exception: Anything related to American sports. But she also conveys that she has learned that “joking about my lack of knowledge of those sports, or teasing the students about “soccer” being “the real football” usually works well to end the conversation on a positive note!” (Agnieszka Tuszynska, personal communication, October 12, 2011)

Xuan Zheng is a Chinese Ph.D. candidate in the English Department of the University of Washington in Seattle. She responded by stating that even though the teacher training program was good, none of the strategies that were used specially applies to ITAs. Even though the composition TAs specialize in cultural studies and literature, she personally still finds herself with very little knowledge of American politics and cultures. Besides, she is not aware of the literacy education American undergraduates went through in college, and she has never taken any class on writing in the United States where she teaches. Even though Zheng (2011) points out that she got along with American students of composition, she notes that she initially felt that the English composition class was a place where an American/English speaking culture should be centered while she had no expertise or authority on it.

When asked what was missing in the pedagogical preparation, Zheng suggests that an earlier exposure of students' writings before teaching composition is helpful. She states that reading an article on students' backgrounds and their writing problems was helpful. However, she did not feel that there were enough reading materials directly related to ITAs' culture, so that the ITAs can develop better teaching materials, instead of feeling isolated by an American-

experience-centered curriculum. As for the gaps between her culture and that of her students, she noted some areas such as slangs, sports, popular stars, politics, and religion. Moreover, her students often times tell her about their hobbies and interests but she did not have any idea what those were and barely knew what words they were using. Some of the strategies she used to overcome these moments included either to act as if she understood what they say or to ask them to explain their cultural reference. Therefore, because of this cultural gap she never felt she was “connected with American students, compared with international students that I am easily getting along. I think in a way the teacher needs better preparation in this; but students also need to be advised in communicating and empathizing their ITAs. After all, the intercultural experience is good for both sides” (Xuan Zheng, personal communication, October 12, 2011).

As I found out that Zheng is in fact working on this issue, she kindly shared with me her study of four international teaching assistants of English composition in an urban university in the northwestern United States. Her findings indicate that they all encountered challenges due to different cultural and educational backgrounds. Three major issues are pointed by Zheng’s (2012) study. First, these ITAs were anxious to go into the classroom, mainly because they didn't know what their students’ English writings looked like. Some of the ITAs were afraid that their native speaker students may already write very well, and thus felt more difficult to establish their authority. Second, the ITAs’ choice of materials was challenging because they did not know what mattered the most to their American undergraduate students, and that is why they avoided readings or topics related to cultural or political issues in the U.S. due to lack of familiarity with these subjects. Third, it was difficult for the ITAs to establish a close relationship with their students, because they could not use some social tools, such as jokes, which they were not funny to American students. Zheng concludes:

Although the ITAs in the study were all able to strategically negotiate their foreign-ness: some used science as their writing topics; some asked students to be cultural informants in class; and some avoided culturally-loaded topics etc., it may still be helpful if the training programs could provide the ITAs with a general knowledge of who their students are, what kind of literacy education they have received before college, the political culture in the U.S., the strategies they could use to draw on their intercultural experiences as advantages. Such training would greatly reduce the anxiety the ITAs face in starting teaching composition in the United States. (para.1)

Apparently, these personal accounts from ITAs indicate that while having some common ground with students facilities teaching in such a classroom dominated by cultural issues as English composition, the lack there of creates nervousness and challenges the teacher more than the students. The experience of teaching within a discipline that presumes that the teacher is from the same culture in which he or she teaches is indeed stressful. When one feels that he or she is culturally alienated, the outcome is not only a bitter experience of displacement, but also a pressure to keep pretending that they have a place as teachers. This place is supposed to be the classroom. However, this classroom becomes an utter foreign country once these teachers see how different they are from their students. This completely true, I think, when students realize how different, or maybe privileged, they are from that teacher who does not know about their culture as much. This teacher would seek to find some guidance from theorists, but he or she can hardly find the guidance that addresses this cultural and pedagogical issue.

I found it ironic that my encounter with issues of otherness and difference in the United States occurred at the same year Peter Pericles Trifonas (2003) published *Pedagogy of Difference*, a book with a collection of essays concerned with the concept of difference as context for teaching and curriculum making. The book offers insightful discussions that help educators to recognize differences. In *Pedagogy of Difference*, the authors of “Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy: Social Justice Reconsidered” argue that the United States has established, since the seventeenth century, an “internal neocolonialism” which is based on colonial and capitalist systems that have created oppressed and dominated groups and put them within an unjust social context. These groups, the authors maintain, are “both normalized and officially sanctioned by dominant strategies and institutional arrangements in American society” (Tejeda, Espinoza, and Gutierrez, 2003, p.11). In order to establish a ground for resisting such colonialism and capitalism, the authors articulate a call for a “decolonizing pedagogy” (Tejeda et al., p.13). I think this call for a decolonizing pedagogy should be supported as well as extended to include in its focus teachers from different cultures. The difference of culture among students is as worth investigating as the difference among teachers. However, though the former’s case is consistently addressed, the latter’s is almost neglected.

In fact, the attention paid to multiculturalism in American education brought with it the debate over whose culture should be taught (Boyle-Base, 1995, p. 265). That emerging debate

concentrated on students and was far from including teachers. Unfortunately, these teachers are excluded in pedagogical works concerned with globalization-based education. That is why in “Globalizing Pedagogies: Power, Resentment, and the Re-Narration of Difference,” one cannot but agree with the call articulated by Greg Dimitrades and Cameron McCarthy (2000) for considering issues of multiculturalism inside and outside teaching and curriculum. In particular, they call for “the cultural reproduction of difference and the coordination of racial identities” (Dimitrades and McCarthy, 2000, p.189). Yet, one would have been more informed by these writers, or by any other contributors, if there had been more focus on the teacher as a subject of difference, not only the students.

Kathleen C Sadao’s (2003) “Living in Two Worlds: Success and the Bicultural Faculty of Color” is the other work that was published around the same time I started to witness how difficult it was to teach in a different culture. Focusing on deconstruction and postcolonialism, from the post-Enlightenment to present, Sadao tries to find solutions to overcome the difference-based difficulties wherever they arise. Sadao surveys some teachers who left their cultures and moved to the American mainstream culture for career settlements in the educational system. Collecting data based on accounts of nineteen “faculty of color” from a research university, Sadao’s qualitative study records the motivation (both internal and external) these faculty members had and how these motivations overcame the challenges of their careers. The theoretical framework Sadao uses gives a bicultural model for “future efforts to recruit and promote faculty of colors,” realizing, however, that “virtually no studies have examined a bicultural theory or model in higher education” (p. 399). This lack of academic interest or scholarship in bicultural teachers in academia does not seem to find any justification other than the fact, or rather the truism, that since these teachers reached the classroom, then they have to fit in the collective identity of being a mainstream teacher. In other words, these teachers’ cultural experiences are likely to be perceived as related to their personal backgrounds.

Though Sadao’s study helps to establish a better understanding of the cultural background these teachers have and how they can switch to the mainstream culture to meet the needs of their positions and institutions, she adopts acculturation as a methodical approach to analyze her findings about the success and failure of these teachers. I believe that this method is not fair, for it stems from the presupposition that these teachers, just like any newcomers to the

mainstream Western culture, should change their identity for the sake of adapting to the dominant culture. Acculturation, as Sadao rightly sees it, “relates to the introduction of and interaction with a new culture, the emphasis being on the potential for compromising one’s previously held beliefs and values to function in the new culture” (p. 399) [emphasis added]. Yet, the indirect suggestion for teachers of color or those from different cultures to compromise their beliefs creates an imposed imperialistic conformity. Acculturation, a concept used since 1880, emerged in the United States for “normalizing” the “Others” as people in need of better (cultural) traits taken from the dominant groups (Berry, 1980, p. 9). As Homer G. Barnett (1975) once illustrated, acculturation rose to the surface of American society with studies conducted by American anthropologists on American Indian reservations. Most of these studies “have focused on the replacement of Indian culture by White culture. These studies have intended to arrange individuals and social groups along an acculturation continuum that ranges for ‘more Indian’ to ‘more White’” (Barnett, 1975, p.12). I contend that any approach to helping these teachers recognize their difference by implying that they need to be acculturated is another way of rejecting their right of difference. It does not show how to empower them with and within their differences. Asking teachers from different cultures to accept acculturation as a solution to their cultural differences is in fact asking for privileging a dominant, mainstream culture over another. Simplistically and sarcastically speaking, if these teachers need to be acculturated as a solution for cultural differences, then the best solution for racism is to “ask” people to be of one color; similarly the solution for gender issues would be to adopt one gender. Is it always necessary to conform? If yes, why is it always the “other” who should conform?

Coming from diverse foreign language backgrounds, international composition teachers like myself often find themselves unintentionally given names that fit the English spelling and pronunciation, compromising their original names either partially, if they come from European languages, or completely, if they come from Eastern languages, such as my native Arabic. More often than not, I personally feel that I am “bell hooked” as I am called by a name that does not sound like my real one. There are two “tongue-twisting” consonants in my first name that do not exist in English, and making up for that in English creates not only a different sound but a constant situation where the act of calling my name sounds like calling another person who is meant to be me. I did not mind having my name assimilated, but this is an example of how identity-related issues arises when teaching in the United States. In composition theories and

discussions, the talk of the town is always about local not global issues, making one wonder if this is because of the assumption that these TAs, for example, do not exist or that they should not.

Ironically, even the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) seemed to ignore this issue and these teachers. In its call for papers on the theme “Representing Identities,” the focus was still on students. Though CCCC had adequately addressed pedagogical issues related to representations or under-representation of the teaching and learning communities, the 2007 Convention did not try to address such an issue by striking a balance between teachers and students. As timely and progressive as it was, the Convention had nonetheless clearly shown a preference to students, rather than to teachers, ignoring the latter and their issues.

Our teaching and research have shown us that our students are much more than any single descriptor, much more than what they write, speak, or sign, much more than listening, or silent ciphers, much more than even our richest interpretations of them. Whether they are identified by labels like basic, ESL, or advanced, by their race, ethnicity, sexuality, or ... ability to present themselves as members of the academic discourse community, our students are much more complex than any single identity they shape and present to us or that we present for them in our teaching and research. (Glenn, 2007, p. 1)

As the composer of the CCCC program proposal, Cheryl Glenn (2007) rightly posited that communication and composition are connected collaterally. In her view, communication and composition were constructed, in form and content, by the participants who “are where they come from, and by the social, and cultural situations they enter. Although issues of identity—fluid, stable, hybrid, regional, inter/trans/national, linguistic, online, ignored, inscribed—are now familiar to us all, they require renewed inspection and innovative inquiry” (Glenn, 2007, p.1). Maybe renewed inspection of already familiar identities is still necessary. Maybe we have reached the point where we move from traditional inquiry to innovative quest. Perhaps the time has come when we should explore unfamiliar identities that are constructed, in shape and content, in an unfamiliar environment. When will international composition teachers have to be assured that we at least recognize their unfamiliarity, otherness, and cultural difference?

Speaking of difference, digression in my culture is not a flaw in one's style of writing. The heritage of the Arabic language has many examples of this practice, which can be explained as the writer's desire to add something important, even if this "addition" is not within the context of the subject matter. Many examples occur in the Arabian Nights as the narrator digresses from one narrative to another, creating a matrix of thrilling stories that generate more tales. When I began my education in English (and was later trained to teach it), digression became something to avoid. The Western concept of coherence is emphasized culturally and stylistically, as Kathleen McCormick (2005) explains:

Our culture's belief in objectivity comes out in the most seemingly mundane social practices—when, for example, students are told to write a 'coherent' essay. Such instructions suggest to many students that incoherence, ambiguity or contradictions are the mark of a poorly written essay (p. 100).

The new culture I am teaching in is imbedded in coherence and expects me to lead my students to achieve coherence as a stylistic device and cultural product, which posits a challenge to me as well as to other teachers in my cultural position. Given the difference in what cultures believe and the simultaneous existence of coherence and incoherence, teachers from different cultures bear the burden of trying to find individual solutions. In "Cultural Conflicts in the Writing Center: Expectations and Assumptions of ESL Students," an essay which calls for understanding different cultures in order to better help ESL writing students, Muriel Harris (2003) notes that: "[w]hile Americans value conciseness, directness, and clarity, work in contrastive rhetoric has shown us that these qualities are not necessarily valued in the discourse of other languages" (p. 199). For example, she shows that there is a contrast between the Asian preference for indirection and the American preference "for clear, overt announcement of a topic in an introductory paragraph" (Harris, 2003, p.199). These differences in styles of writing are reflections of specific cultures. I think that more research needs to be done to see how much these differences influence not only writing students but also their instructors.

### Cultural Literacy: Is it the Solution?

Cultural literacy is perhaps the most problematic issue concerning the situation of teachers from different cultures. According to C.H. Knoblauch (1990):

Cultural literacy offers another common argument about the importance of reading and writing, one frequently mounted by traditionalist educators but sustained in populist versions as well, especially among people who feel insecure about their own standing and their future prospects when confronted by the volatile mix of ethnic heritages and socioeconomic interests that make up contemporary American life. (p. 77)

This characterization of cultural literacy stems from the attempt to preserve the culture by promoting its understanding and essentializing its products. As Knoblauch points out, in other discussions of cultural literacy, English is considered the only “truly American language,” which might be attributed to the instinct of preserving a culture. I contend that it could also be motivated by allowing one culture, the strong and mainstream one, to dominate others. If culture produces the language we speak and the way we interact with each other, and if the international teacher learned English outside the States, then this teacher is a “misfit” in the classroom. According to this notion of cultural literacy, being from a different culture will automatically qualify this teacher as alien. “The economic self-interest that pervades the functionalist perspective frequently gives way here to jingoistic protectionism; cultural literacy advocates presume that the salvation of some set of favored cultural norms or language practices lies necessarily in the marginalizing or even extinction of others” (Knoblauch, 1990, p.77). It is therefore necessary for both national and international compositionists to decide whether this hegemonic notion of cultural literacy accepts teachers from different cultures or not. If it does, then intellectual efforts should be exerted to show how international teachers can be involved in the process of (teaching) cultural literacy when they themselves are not from the same culture as their students.

The editors of *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil (2006), agree that unlike expert knowledge, cultural literacy is “meant to be shared by everyone” (p. x). Maybe because they realize that “everyone” is defined as every American, they specify cultural literacy to be “that shifting body of information that our culture has found useful” (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, 2006, p. x). Hirsch and his colleagues set three ways to categorize certain information within the domain of cultural literacy or at least their dictionary criterion. First, information should not be too specialized or too general, so that neither the knowledge of, say, color names (general) or a computer language code (specialized) qualify as components of cultural literacy. Second, the information, whether about an event, person, concept, or other similar cultural reference, should be widely known. Third, the information should be of lasting significance, a criterion that rules out the knowledge of current events and signifies any other event that “has found a place in our collective memory or it has the promise of finding such a place. This is one of the things that contributes to the stability of cultural literacy in America” (Hirsch et al., 2006, p. xi). From the way these authors set the grounds for their work on cultural literacy, we notice that all three frames are meant in one way or another to include or exclude informational items according to their status in the public knowledge of the country. This status is meant to be the status quo, which hardly conforms with the critical thinking that the teacher might develop based on his experience with a different culture. Critical thinking, as Catharine Fox (2002) maintains, “is posited as one of the primary skills that enable students to become co-participants in the creation of knowledge through alternative pedagogies... [And] it enables us to transform structures of power, knowledge, and authority” (p.199). But if we assume that cultural literacy and critical thinking go hand in hand, we still need to know where the international teacher stands in this issue. We need to know how he or she will be perceived as an agent of cultural literacy in a classroom culturally foreign to him or her.

Apart from the informative approach to cultural literacy as manifested in *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* approaches cultural literacy by adopting the imperative that minority students should be acculturated. Hirsch (2006) believes that these students should accept the mainstream culture and show no resistance to its dominance. Hirsch implies that if the minority student rejects such acculturation, he or she will be involved in “an act of ignorance— cultural suicide—or a failure on the part of the student to identify what meaningful knowledge is actually about” (p. 13). Eugene F. Provenzo (2005), Jr.,

just like many other theorists, would argue that this approach to cultural literacy is a colonialist model of education. Moreover, in their approach to basic writing tutoring, Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski (2003) contend that if the university adopts mainstreaming writing and works on altering the students' cultural discourses, then the result of this change in style and form leads to a (colonizing) change of thinking (p. 87), a result that acculturation tries, unrightfully, to achieve. According to Provenzo the colonialist models of education "not only apply to historically colonized societies but also to economic and racial groups in a culture such as the United States. The effects of such models, whether as part of a historically colonial system such as Victorian England, or as part of a system of racial or class domination like that of the United States throughout most of its history, are devastating" (Provenzo, 2005, p.33). Provenzo tries to raise awareness of how the conservative approach to cultural literacy (Hirsch's) is meant to dominate minority students. However, the conservative position on acculturation as well as its liberal counterargument unintentionally agree on one issue: both sides omit the teachers of minorities in their discussions, as if these minorities do not have a place in academic institutions other than being students. We can assume that they see these minorities as mere students. Thus, we can also assume that they do not want to discuss how these teachers can be engaged in such discussions about cultural literacy, or how they can be active participants in the educational process in this country.

Bell hooks (1994) is probably now the most iconic educationalist and cultural critic from a minority background. Though she enlightens the field with theories and insights about how to deal with issues related to minorities, especially if these group minorities are based on gender or race, she hardly talks about the position of teachers from different cultures. Bell hooks believes in an emancipating pedagogy that encourages dialogue and empowers students. However, as a teacher herself, she had a unique experience that can enlighten pedagogues and cultural critics on both how it "feels" and how it works to teach within a dominant culture different than the teacher's, instead of focusing only on students. Bell hooks believes that "education should be a place where the need for diverse teaching methods and styles would be valued, encouraged, seen as essential to learning" (p. 203). She has witnessed how empowering the classes are when they go beyond the conventional norms. Yet, as far as teachers from different cultures are concerned, I think that bell hooks would help their cause much better if she went beyond talking about "domestic" minority students and tried to engineer some theoretical guidelines for their teachers.

Though her main concern is making education change its direction to undo the suppression that both minority and majority students face in American institutions, bell hooks admits that this is not effortless.

Many professors remain unwilling to be involved with any pedagogical practices that emphasize mutual participation between teacher and student because more time and effort are required to do this work.... Talking about pedagogy, thinking about it critically, is not the intellectual work that most folks think is hip and cool... Most of us are not inclined to see discussion of pedagogy as central to our academic work and intellectual growth, or the practice of teaching as work that enhances and enriches scholarship. (p. 204-05)

Certainly, pedagogical theorization is not easy task. What I am calling for here is something similar to the “mutual participation between teacher and student.” I am calling theorists, especially those who highly value a legacy like bell hooks’, to be engaged in a pedagogically mutual participation between mainstream theory and teachers from different cultures.

In *The Culture of Reading and the Reading of English*, Kathleen McCormick (1994) notes that theorists like Gramsci, Althusser, and Bourdieu have realized that educational institutions, as ideological spaces, produce the means that distribute discourses or “cultural capital.” McCormick argues that teachers and students should respond to this fact by critically evaluating the knowledge these institutions provide. Whether delivered or received, knowledge is still part and parcel of the culture whose objects, as McCormick posits, are to be examined historically.

If readers and viewers are regarded as active producers of meaning, within specific cultural constraints, it follows that rather than positioning students as mere passive receivers of knowledge, schools should encourage them to engage actively in the production of knowledge and meaning: schooling should enable students to articulate their own readings of cultural objects and introduce them to discourse that can help them explore the ways in which cultural objects are historically and socially produced. (p. 52)

If the teachers who come from different cultures reach the level of awareness about the educational structures of their students’ culture, they still need to adjust their level of critique,

which is influenced by their former education and culture, a problem that also needs to be addressed among composition and pedagogy theorists. Ideology is relevant here, for McCormick notes that it is “expressed in the educational systems of any society” (p.83). These teachers are not part of the historically situated educational system that hosts them, and their ideologies are formed outside the society of their students. It is not known whether they are supposed to express such ideologies or hide them.

Henry Armand Giroux (2003) points out that critical theorists have recently called for “rethinking the political and pedagogical possibilities of multiculturalism within higher education” (p. 83). Giroux also shows the success that critical multiculturalism has achieved in pedagogy:

Signaling a new understanding of how the mechanisms of domination and exclusion work to reproduce and legitimate the entrenched nature of class, race, gender, and sexual hierarchies in higher education, critical multiculturalists often combine the study of symbolic and signifying practices with a reinvigorating and necessary study of the relations between culture and politics. For many critical multiculturalists the process of schooling is viewed as a terrain of struggle over the meaning and purpose of humanities, the value of disciplinarity, the regulatory function of culture, the relationship between knowledge and authority, and who has ownership over the conditions for the production of knowledge. (p. 83)

However excited about such advancement in multiculturalism, Giroux also narrates these victories without including any achievements for teachers who are from a spectrum of cultures and who find no place in which they can see their concerns, success, failures, or expectations. Indeed, today’s educational institutions offer students with a variety of “pedagogical options in which they can invest, act, and speak... for critical, social agency” (Giroux, 2003, p.84). Nevertheless, it would be more helpful if these institutions provide an equal amount of pedagogical choices for those teachers and to show them how to invest their differences to reach the same goals of agency-oriented pedagogy.

## Conclusion

I am not arguing for a course that introduces these teachers to American culture. Many of them might consider such a course redundant, especially those who find themselves already familiar with the cultural information of the course. Such a course is not an immediate solution to this complicated issue. I agree with Michael W. Apple (2005) who believes that courses designed to provide informational items are not a good choice. As he puts it:

I think it is important to understand that a curriculum based on a lot of facts and concepts that everyone should learn is a flawed project. It fundamentally misconstrues what literacy is about, decontextualizes it, and ignores the history of discussions and debates both about what literacy is for and about the differential patterns of benefits that come from institutionalizing certain definitions and not others. (p. ix)

How can these teachers teach cultural literary without being acculturated in the first place? What are the tools, training, and scholarship available to facilities composition teachers coming from outside the United States? How can they teach academic literacy to college students when they do not have the same cultural literacy themselves? What I want to see in courses for preparing international teachers is more emphasis on how to deal with culturally charged moments like the Dr. Seuss's incident or, more importantly, I want to see cultural studies critics to open the door for more well-informed investigations on how to prepare these teachers to be able to carry the message of cultural literacy without sounding ignorant or totally out of place. It's time to hear theorists talk about how different cultures among teachers can be utilized pedagogically. I want to see and hear teachers from all cultures call and respond to the call for representing identity. In this regard, I totally agree with Danny K Weil (1998) as he commends that "teacher-training programs should afford teachers the opportunities to gain an insight into their own unexamined attitudes as well as societal attitudes toward cultural reality and the students they teach" (p.156). I also fully support his suggestion that "teachers [especially the cultural newcomers] need continual reactions and advice from communities and peers to help them see how they distribute education opportunities to their students" (Weil, 1998, p.157). As the teachers I surveyed point out, there

should be more work to be done so that the culture references and differences be acknowledged, assessed and addressed. With the world becoming more globalized and “‘English’ belongs to all those who use it,” as Barbara Seidlhofer (2009) puts it, educators need to recognize not only the inevitability of having World Englishes<sup>iii</sup> but also the necessity to allow world cultures to be a source of education not anxiety or embarrassment.

I call for the pedagogy of difference to be enhanced in order to encourage students to accept the concept of difference, not only among themselves but also in the way they perceive their teachers who might be “different” from them. If encouraged, this difference awareness will be helpful not only for international teachers but also for American teachers. These latter teachers might face a similar situation of being out of place when they are introduced to a new environment in which teaching their counterpart (student) citizens is faced with the inconvenience of being considered from a different culture. In a word, teachers from different cultures, those who come to the United States from different citizenship need more pedagogical attention. They come from different countries, but their batteries of ideas need to be charged with insightful pedagogy that address their concerns and issues, so that they go to the classroom not tied by their limitation but free from the stresses of cultural shocks.

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> Jhally, Sut, Susan Ericsson, Sanjay Talreja, Jackson Katz, Jeremy Earp, and David Rabinovitz. *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on World Englishes, see Kirkpatrick, Andy. *World Englishes: Implications for International Communication and English Language Teaching*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007. For linguistic variability in world Englishes, SeeVan, Rooy B. "Social and Linguistic Perspectives on Variability in World Englishes." *World Englishes*. 29.1 (2010): 3-20.