
Helping Refugee Students Find Their Voices

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Despite my best efforts, in my community college freshman composition classroom, the students sit in clumps: PSEO students near the front; nontraditional students retraining for new jobs in the middle, student athletes in the back row, traditional students next to their Facebook or MySpace crews, and—in the back corner—two or three refugees.

I teach at Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC). We have a significant population of Somali refugee students at our college. I have a special place in my heart for them because I lived in Africa when the Somali civil war started and raged on. Every night we would sit around the radio and listen to BBC Africa unfold the tragedy. Now that I teach Somalis here in the United States, I wanted to find out what their motivations for writing were. To find out, I needed to talk to them as people with complex lives rather than as students. I knew that if I maintained my traditional authority as a teacher they would just tell me what I wanted to hear. That is why I interviewed male Somali students who were not in my own courses.

My research project focused on male Somali refugee students in freshman composition classes, not ESL classes or developmental writing courses. In the freshman composition courses I teach at RCTC, there are usually two to three male Somali students per composition course.

To find out about writing motivations, I interviewed fourteen male Somali students. I then compared their responses to current composition theories in order to create a focused classroom writing project that would help male Somali refugee students find their voices.

From the interviews, I discovered that their complicated lives affect their perceptions of writing tasks. From the composition theories, I found some teaching methods that help to acknowledge cultural differences in composition classrooms. From the classroom writing project, I learned that my male Somali refugee students could develop their own voices once they were provided with the proper internal motivations for writing.

I am always asked why I did not interview female Somali students as well for my project. The answer is that I had to do the interviews off campus, without chaperones. It would have been culturally unacceptable for me, a single man, to ask female Somali students to coffee shops or restaurants for the interviews. That is research that I hope an enterprising female teacher can do after reading this article.

Even though my research focused on male Somali refugee students, I think that my findings could be useful for teachers with refugees from other countries as well. The experiences they describe are culture-general, rather than culture-specific.

I hope that my research is just the beginning of lots of other projects about refugee students. I believe that we need to know much more about our refugee students in order to teach them effectively. They are not like foreign ESL students because they cannot go back to their home countries. They are not like newcomer students because they did not choose to come to the United States. They have suffered. The standard definition of a refugee is a person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable ... to return” (United Nations 16). Refugee students are an invisible population on our campuses. They are difficult to classify because they do not attend institutions in defined groups; their education is not com-

pulsory; and their education takes many different shapes (Cooke and Peckham 6-12; Potocky-Tripodi 361). For these reasons, research about our refugee students is important.

What I Discovered from the Interviews

This section is divided into a brief explanation of my interview methodology and an explanation of my interview findings.

Interview methodology

My research focused on male Somali refugee students in freshman composition classes, students who had already completed or tested out of the ESL or developmental writing courses. In composition courses at RCTC where I teach, there are mainly native English speakers and a few former ESL students in each course. The male Somalis in my composition courses are very motivated to do well.

My database consisted of interview transcriptions from fourteen male Somali refugee students. Another question people ask me is why I stopped after fourteen students. The answer is that in grounded theory, the qualitative research paradigm I used, there is no need for further data collection when later research subjects repeat the major themes of earlier research subjects. This is known as the saturation point (Creswell 56).

In the grounded theory research paradigm, interviews must be carefully planned and executed.¹ First, my interviews took place off campus, in the preferred spaces of my interviewees. I spent a lot of time in Somali restaurants and coffee shops, for example. If I had conducted the interviews on campus, the setting would have altered my interviewees' responses because of the institutional symbols of power and authority that are inherent to all colleges. Second, in order to find male Somalis to interview, I asked my colleagues if they had students in their classes that might be willing. I then contacted the students to explain the nature of my project to see if they would participate.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. I asked each person the same questions. The questions focused on their

overall view of their college experience, people who affect their college experience, college accessibility, their work lives, their college courses, their desires for self-improvement, and basic demographic information. These questions were formulated after an extensive review of refugee education literature established that these were the topics that affected refugee students' college success the most.²

Table 1, below, provides the basic demographic information about the students I interviewed.

	Age	Semesters at Community College	Years in USA	Years in Somalia	Years in other countries
Subject 1	19	2	12	7	0
Subject 2	21	4	5	15	1
Subject 3	22	5	3	11	8
Subject 4	24	5	7	17	0
Subject 5	26	4	4	15	7
Subject 6	29	3	10	19	0
Subject 7	35	4	11	24	0
Subject 8	36	1	2	34	0
Subject 9	39	2	6	33	0
Subject 10	42	1	5	37	0
Subject 11	46	2	7	34	5
Subject 12	47	4	8	39	0
Subject 13	50	4	9	36	5
Subject 14	55	5	3	42	10

Table 1: Male Somali refugee student demographic information

Interview results

For interview results to be valid in grounded theory research, a homogeneous population has to be interviewed. This was accomplished in my research by having three important variables the same: gender, cultural derivation, refugee status. Even greater validity could have been attained if I could have interviewed students who were all the same age. I did try, but I was not able to find interview subjects in the same age range. Even so, the major findings of my interview research are credible because so many of the research subjects mentioned the same ideas.

In grounded theory, the researcher examines the interview data in order to find out the major themes that the interview group feels are important. I have chosen representative quotes from my interviews to illustrate these major themes. Therefore, do not imagine one male Somali saying the quotes that follow. Rather, imagine a whole chorus of male Somalis saying the quotes.

To summarize the results of my fourteen interviews in one paragraph, I discovered that male Somali refugee students shifted from external to internal motivations for writing by finding support from others at each stage of their writing development. As they began college, they sought encouragement from family and friends. As they got used to college, they hesitantly sought support from teachers. Finally, the refugee students described epiphanies when they realized that they could write well. I explain each of these findings in more detail in the paragraphs that follow. I have changed the names to protect the identities of the students.

At first, the students wanted to write well to provide for their families, both in the United States and abroad. Language skills were necessary for them to find better jobs. Twelve out of fourteen interviewees stated that this was their main reason for going to school and improving their English. Hussein, a twenty-two-year old student who had been in the United States for three years at the time of the interview and community college for five semesters, provided an eloquent explanation of how families motivated the Somalis:

I have 18 sisters and brothers. They call me. You know, they listen to each other. One calls me, then the other calls me, and they always need my support, and my father knows they call me and he also needs my support and he says, 'I'm not asking you to send me money, you know. But I'm asking you to keep continuing your education.' Although, he needs my help, so I send him money.

So, the first major theme I discovered from my interviews is that male Somali refugee students wanted to learn to write well as quickly as possible in order to earn more for their families. This is an external writing motivation. In other words, it is a pressure

to succeed in writing that came from the outside environment rather than internal student desires.

The second major theme I discovered from the interviews was that male Somali refugee students also needed motivation from their friends in order to write well. Nine out of fourteen students used friend networks to stay motivated. Ahmed, a thirty-five-year-old who had been in the United States for eleven years and community college for four semesters, gave a succinct explanation of how these friend networks function:

We talk to each other about what to take and who is this teacher there and who is not and who helps with the minority people and who doesn't interest well in English, who's helpful. We ask these questions, and we know the information when we reach the classes, and start. We know where we get the help and where we learn.

The refugee students' friend networks were cohesive, extensive, and efficient at passing on useful information. These networks were organized based upon shared major/certificate programs. For the most part, the Somalis were concentrated in major/certificate programs that would get them out of community college and earning money quickly. They therefore had a lot of classes and teachers in common.

The third major theme I discovered from the interviews is that, once the male Somali refugee students became used to college, they sought support from their teachers in order to write well. Thirteen out of fourteen interviewees discussed this in their interviews. They found it difficult to talk to teachers at first because of culture and power differences. Many Somalis felt that if they told teachers that they did not understand something, the teachers would think that they, the Somali students, were accusing the teachers of poor teaching.

The students vividly remembered instances where teachers provided them with encouragement. Ali, a fifty-year-old student who had been in the United States for nine years and community college for four semesters, provided a representative comment about teacher encouragement:

The first thing was when I came to the teacher's class, he gave us to write a database article from anywhere, but not a book or web site. Then he said, 'You have to write with your own words.' It was almost one paragraph, two paragraphs. When he was collecting the paragraphs from the printer, and he read, when he read my paragraph, he said, 'You folks, you know that it does not mean that you're not American that you cannot write.' He said, 'These American people can talk English better than you, but they cannot write English better than you.'

Like all the other students who discussed teacher encouragement, this student was very proud of what the teacher had told him.

The fourth major theme I discovered from the interviews was that the male Somali students needed to feel welcome in a course before they could do well in it. Nine participants discussed this issue. They said that they did not like speaking up in class if they did not understand concepts or assignments. They remained silent when teachers asked if there were any questions. They suggested that teachers ask them directly in one-to-one conversations if they understood assignments or class main points. They also suggested that teachers end classes a few minutes early so that they could approach the teachers to ask their questions.

The fifth major theme I discovered from the interviews is that refugee students realized they could write well in English. Eleven out of fifteen students discussed this phenomenon. The timing of these epiphanies varied. For some students, it took place fairly quickly in the semester. For others, it took almost the entire semester before they realized their writing talents. The key point is that the epiphanies occurred for motivated students after assignments where the teachers provided focused feedback and encouragement. After these epiphanies, the male Somali refugee students enjoyed writing as a means of expressing their thoughts. They wanted to learn to write well because they took pride in their work. For example, Abdul, a twenty-nine-year-old who had lived in the USA for ten years and been to community college for three semesters, said, "I remember one time. I don't

know what happened to me. I did bad on a paper. When I got the result, I was so mad. Then I went to the teacher in the office, and after that I did well.”

Another Somali student who had been in the USA for ten years and community college for three semesters made a similar comment about his light bulb moment that occurred in a developmental English course: “We were talking about how to take notes ... The thing was ... there was no understanding. But I just make them easy, how you understand and help the problem. Stuff like that. I was covering that ... This course, I like it.”

Finally, yet another Somali student who had been in the USA for five years and in community college for four semesters remembered his epiphany: “My [speech] teacher was, like, take control over your fear. He said it will take time to go through, but go through it. And it was fun. It was fun.”

In conclusion I discovered from the interviews that these male Somali refugee students have complicated lives that affect their writing. They want to write well in order to care for their families. They talk to their friends to make it through their writing courses. They need to feel welcome in their courses. They make hesitant contact with their writing teachers. They have learning epiphanies. Like all community college students, they are liminal people.

What I Discovered from Current Composition Theories

After the interviews, I felt that I better understood the situations my male Somali refugee students faced in their composition courses. My understanding was based on lots of research and hard work, rather than assumptions, so I was happy with the results. Before the interviews, for example, I assumed that second language interference issues were the main writing issues my refugee students faced. After the interviews, I realized that they had several other pressures on them as well that affected their writing. However, the interview results did not necessarily help me to become a better teacher for refugees. In

order to further inform my teaching, I needed to examine current composition theories that apply to refugee students. In this section, I provide an overview of those theories.

Once refugee students know that we value them, several pedagogical approaches are available. Traditional students and refugee students, for example, would benefit from Grobman's difference curriculum ("Thinking Differently about Difference" 347-357). Grobman points out two misconceptions her students have when encountering difference. First, students base their understanding of an entire culture on their limited encounters with difference. Second, they over-generalize from their brief encounter with difference, assume that people everywhere are basically the same, and consequently ignore strong cultural forces (347). In Grobman's model teachers are to initiate "explicit efforts to ascertain difference in value systems; movement toward identifying difference within difference; engagement with the constructed nature of stereotypes, behaviors, and belief systems; and experience with *othered* [sic] subject positions" (351). In a similar way, Pipher advocates "selective acculturation" for refugees, the process of helping refugees decide what to keep from their old cultures and what to accept and what to reject in their new cultures (*The Middle of Everywhere* 77). We can help refugee students with these complicated processes.

Grobman's curriculum implies that we should select readings and assignments that emphasize that the United States contains a plurality of cultures, instead of the monolithic concept of United States culture that many of our students (refugee and traditional) espouse. Pipher's selective acculturation suggests that we should then help not only our refugee students but also our traditional students make informed choices about their cultural values. In essence, both Grobman and Pipher argue for a critical examination of cultural values and assumptions, a skill that we composition teachers need to develop in all of our students.

There is a risk when we teach about difference, though. Refugee students might be viewed as so different that we might probe refugee students' lives and ignore the subtler distinctions between other cultures in our classes. Marzluf makes this pre-

cise point by contending that we may “exoticize” our students if we privilege their diversity writing too much (“Diversity Writing” 505). Students could consequently become too committed to their own cultures and refuse to examine other viewpoints. Instead, Marzluf suggests that for diversity topics we should create assignments that compel students to examine issues from a variety of different viewpoints rather than from their own specific cultural perspectives (518). Williams agrees with Marzluf by asserting that we cannot step out of our own dominant cultural ideologies to understand our students’ texts (“Speak for Yourself?” 594). Any understanding we do is in the context of the dominant culture. Any writing the students produce in our classes is necessarily an attempt to fit into the dominant culture, even if they are writing about cross-cultural themes (Williams 594). Marzluf and Williams’ insistence on a variety of viewpoints may be especially helpful for our refugee students because refugee students may not have had practice shifting points of view.

We also need to let refugee students know that it is permissible to enter Pratt’s contact zone in our classrooms (“Arts of the Contact Zone” 33-40).³ Contact zones would probably work well for refugee students who have identifiable cultures. However, some refugee students do not. They flee as children, spend years in camps, live as guests in other countries, and finally come here as refugees. Such students probably do not feel that they have identifiable cultures. Because these students lived in contact zones long before they showed up in our classes, though, they can teach us how to handle cultural ambiguity, rather than we teaching them.

Flower’s concept of intercultural rhetoric also informs refugee student pedagogy. For intercultural rhetoric to work, teachers and students must articulate the confusions that arise from difference: “The paradox of intercultural dialogues is that the things dividing us that are hardest to share—the deep roots of history, the racially shaped experience, and the repertoire of interpretive strategies we use to make sense of that experience—may also be the ones we need most to communicate” (“Talking Across Difference” 55). Intercultural rhetoric focuses on clear

explanations of cultural confusion. For example, when teaching “Young Goodman Brown,” I asked a refugee student to describe the setting. He responded that it happened in the jungle. I was momentarily confused because I always imagine the story taking place in a pine forest. We then had a great classroom discussion about how true literature can transcend its original settings.

However, I do not think that teachers should believe that intercultural rhetoric is the only answer for improving refugee student writing. From my research, I discovered that refugee students want to judiciously assimilate to American culture. They want better jobs. They want to fit in. If we overemphasize intercultural rhetoric, we risk frustrating our refugee students.

What I Discovered from a Classroom Project with Refugee Students

Last year, I taught a section of freshman composition that had several refugee students in it. The students did research about newcomer adaptation to the United States based on Pipher’s refugee book *The Middle of Everywhere*. The project was the culmination of freshman composition: a six-to-eight-page research paper containing citations from online, print, and field research sources. The refugee students, quite naturally, chose to examine the experiences of their own family and acquaintances in order to see how closely their experiences mirrored those in Pipher’s book. The traditional students chose to examine the heritage of their own families. Many of them discovered family lore from the era of their grandparents and great-grandparents, newcomers all to the United States.

An unintentional, but welcome, contrast occurred. As the refugee students presented their research about recent adaptation to the United States, the traditional students heard the echo of their families’ histories in the words of the new arrivals.

Even with such fortunate teaching moments, though, a split developed in the class. On the negative side, one student felt that he was being unfairly penalized for having to do a research project that he knew little about. The student said to me privately that I was making the refugees in the class the favored

students. Another student voiced the opinion, privately to me, that “they should all just go back where they came from.”

On the positive side, a young man from Rochester planning to major in anthropology was overjoyed at the chance to get to apply real field-work investigative skills. One of my Somali males said that he finally could write about something he knew a lot about. Another Somali male said that, after reading the book, he and his family no longer felt so alone. A young female student said that she never really knew that refugee lives were so difficult. A post-secondary enrollment student said that she now understood students in her high school a lot better.

The research assignment made the refugee students in the class the experts because they talked to their friends and family and because they could read in other languages. It was a role reversal for them. For example, Omar, a Somali who had been in the United States for seven years and in community college for five semesters, wrote the following precise analysis of education in Somalia:

Since January 1991, Somalia had no stable educational system because of the civil war that still exists in Somalia. Children who have been born since the civil war started are not getting reliable education. Therefore, American schools may have different kinds of Somali students who really need to get special educational services. The different types of Somali students are: A) Students who have some experience in the school system in their country already. B) Students who are new to the educational system. These students have had little experience or had nothing when they were in their home country. These students have more problems coping with the American education system.

Knowledge such as this would have been difficult for non-Somali students to obtain. The class consequently benefited from Omar’s explanation. Moments such as these were what made the research project such a valuable experience.

Conclusion

Refugee students in our traditional composition courses move from external to internal motivations for writing. Our job is to facilitate this process. Composition theories show us how we can help our refugee students with this shift. We can not assume, though, that any one theory will give us all the pedagogical answers we need. Once we implement pedagogies for refugee students in our composition courses, we must expect initial confusion and eventual insights from the refugee and non-refugee students in our courses.

My own teaching has improved as a result of this project. From the many interviews I did, I learned to examine my own assumptions about refugee students in my composition classes. Composition theories about classroom cultures have also improved my teaching. I now believe that our classrooms can be places where cultures are examined, written about, and shared. Finally, the classroom research project has shown me that I need to create assignments that allow all of my students to succeed equally, no matter where they are from.

So, do my students still sit in clumps when they come to class? Yes, they still do. Now, though, the people in different clumps talk to each other before class starts. It is a small change, but I have hope.

Notes

1. For comprehensive information about the interview methodology, including the interview instrument itself, e-mail me at mike.mutschelknaus@roch.edu or call me at 507-280-3510.

2. Contact me at mike.mutschelknaus@roch.edu or 507-280-3510 if you want the literature review.

3. Pratt defines contact zones as cultural confusions that occur in places with several different cultures. These cultural clashes also may involve the unequal distribution of power. New ideas arise in contact zones if people acknowledge differences and work to reduce their confusion.

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