How opinion is expressed in Asian cultures: Challenges for intercultural communication in a globalised world

Dilhara Premaratne

Australian National University

Abstract

Due to the heightened intercultural communication brought about by globalisation and advanced communication technologies, the ability to respond in culturally sensitive ways when interacting with other cultures is becoming increasingly important. A cultural variation that can easily lead to miscommunication is the practice of expressing opinion. Cultural variations in expressing opinion could be particularly pronounced between the East and the West. While expressing one’s opinion is considered an equal right in the West, it is not held in the same light in most Asian societies. One possible reason for this is that Asian societies had different traditions of opinion formation and expression in the past. In most Asian cultures, opinion-formation was considered mainly the responsibility of those who were influential or in a position of authority. Also, the value attached to group harmony discouraged people from expressing opinion, particularly when it is critical of others. It is likely that this reluctance to express opinion which is common in day-to-day oral interactions is also manifest in writing. The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which culture-specific modes of opinion expression are used in Asian writing and how they are different from the way opinion is expressed in English.

Key words: intercultural communication, globalisation, expression of opinion, Asian cultures, group harmony

Introduction

Due to globalisation and advanced communication technologies, interaction between societies has seen a dramatic increase today. In this scenario of heightened intercultural communication, the ability to respond in culturally sensitive ways when interacting with other cultures has gained increasing prominence. The business and education sectors are two major domains where it is important to raise awareness of the impact of globalisation on intercultural communication. Global businesses need to understand how to communicate with employees and customers from different cultures in order to fulfil organizational missions and to build value for stakeholders (Matthews and Thakkar 2012). Similarly, due to the internationalisation of scholarship, academics and students engaged in educational exchange need to be aware of cultural differences that could have an impact on classroom culture and discourse communities (Crose 2011; Duszak 1997; Gopal 2011).

A cultural difference that can easily lead to miscommunication is the practice of expressing opinion. Cultural variations in expressing opinion could be particularly pronounced between the East and the West. While expressing one’s opinion is considered an equal right in the West, it is not attached the same value in most Asian societies. One possible reason for this is that they had different traditions of opinion formation and expression in the past. In most Asian cultures, opinion-formation was considered mainly the responsibility of those who were influential or in a position of authority. As speaking carried with it a commitment to abide by the consequences, speaking about matters of public importance was primarily left to those who had the power and authority to take action which corresponded with their words (Nisbett, 2003; Oliver, 1971; Panetta 2001).

Also, the fundamental purpose and nature of communication between Asian and Western cultures is different (Scollon & Scollon, 1994 cited in Huang 2003). In Western cultures, the purpose of communication is information exchange, whereas in Asian cultures the focus of communication is
relationship building and maintenance. In Asia, relationships are therefore emphasised over communication. Consequently, in Asian cultures, group harmony and collective values play an important role in interpersonal interactions. This results in a general reluctance for criticising others, especially those who are older or more experienced, or who have a higher social or economic status. In conflict situations, people in these cultures tend to use more abstract, indirect and avoiding styles and allow others to make inferences from the context in order to avoid embarrassment or disagreement. In contrast, in western cultures that value personal over collective goals, and where people are encouraged to be explicit, direct and factual, members tend to speak out, expressing emotions, desires and opinions. In East-Asian cultures the value of social harmony has been further enhanced by the influence of Confucianism which seeks to achieve self-fulfilment in a harmonious but hierarchical social context (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Liu & Cai, 2010; Lu, 2000).

It is likely that this reluctance to express opinion which is common in day-to-day oral interactions is carried over into more specialised domains where writing plays an important role. The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which culture-specific modes of opinion expression are used in writing in such domains and how they are different from the way opinion is expressed in English.

How opinion is expressed in Asian writing

Research shows that the Asian ways of expressing opinion are reflected to some extent in written business communication. Connor (1988) examined the written correspondence between a Japanese and an American manager responsible for marketing training of a large US pharmaceutical company during a two year period. In the study, forty seven documents of written correspondence (letters, faxes and electronic mail messages) were analysed to assess directness and concern for interpersonal harmony. The findings showed that while the American manager suggested changes and even improvements through open criticism, the Japanese manager used more subtle ways of expressing his opinion.

Connor also did a detailed analysis of the argumentative strategies used by the Japanese manager in an important business report. She found that his strategies led to a misunderstanding when he made a funding request for a marketing training session for new salespeople. Instead of stating the claim directly, the Japanese manager only suggested extra funding and facilities, using tentative expressions along with hedges and modifiers. The American manager reacted negatively to his request which resulted in the Japanese manager not receiving support for the suggested improvements.

Kong (1998) analysed thirty authentic business request letters from a variety of sources and companies in Hong Kong, using Swales’ Move Structure Analysis (MSA) and Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST). Swales’ Move Structure Analysis showed that Chinese letter writers show a preference for the Justification + Claim pattern while the English letter writers show a preference for the Claim + Justification pattern. The Rhetorical Structure Theory analysis revealed a more complicated structure in the Chinese letters with a higher average number of propositions than in the English letters. The results showed that the Chinese and English business letters have a different rhetorical structure even though they express the same communicative purpose of making a request. Kong concluded that the differences were due to different face relationships involved in the business transaction and the different participant roles that resulted. In routine business letters written by native English writers, the expectations of the roles of the writer and reader are more simple, as there is an information seeker and an information giver on a more or less equal social footing. However, in business interactions in China, where negotiating is a long and inevitable process, initial trade inquiries are not treated as simply a chance to seek information but also as a chance to build rapport with the prospective partners.

One of the main reasons for the differences noted in business communication is the value attached to independence in the West versus interdependence in the East. Nisbett (2003) reports on a survey carried out at an international business school in Holland in 1993 by two professors of the school, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars. They asked middle managers in a number of eastern and western countries whether they preferred jobs in which personal initiative are encouraged and individual initiatives are achieved versus jobs in which no one is singled out for personal honour but in
which everyone works together. More than 90% of the western managers favoured individual freedom as opposed to fewer than 50% of the eastern managers.

Similar cultural variations have been observed in the domain of higher education, more specifically in classroom discourse and written academic discourse. Debate, discussion, comment, review etc, to which the expression of opinion is central are an intrinsic part of classroom discourse, particularly in countries of the Anglosphere. Children begin to express their opinions and justify them as early as the show-and-tell sessions in kindergarten years (Nisbett 2003). Research shows that there are mismatches in the expectations of academics of the Anglosphere and Asian students especially in relation to student participation in class discussion. While Chinese students do not respond well to the interactive, open-discourse approach favoured by expatriate teachers, they would participate in discussion only when they are required to recite facts or narrate personal experience (Bodycott and Walker 2000; Li 2003 cited in University of Waikato 2004). It has also been found that when working in writing groups organised for the purpose of improving individual student work, Japanese students are hesitant to offer comments on peer writing for fear that they might hurt other students. This reticence has been attributed to the emphasis put on the collective common good in Chinese and Japanese upbringing and education (Carson and Nelson 1994; Waikato 2004).

With respect to written discourse, research shows that Asian writers use culture-specific ways of expressing opinion in research articles and other higher degree academic genres when writing in their native languages as well as in English. This particular research focused on the writing of introductions and conclusions to research articles and similar genres where writers are required to express their opinion in academic contexts.

Jogthong (2001) reviewed introductions in forty research articles written in Thai by Thai academic writers. The articles were taken from medical and educational journals published in the Thai language. The CARS (Create A Research Space) model proposed by Swales (1990) was used to review the rhetorical characteristics of the introductions. The model consists of three moves accompanied by several steps in each move. The three moves are Establishing a Territory, Establishing a Niche and Occupying the Niche.

While the reviewed introductions supported the general framework presented by Swales, the specific steps in the introductions were less consistent with the model. A notable difference was observed in Move 1 step 3 which is called Reviewing Items of Previous Research. In this step, Thai writers merely summarised items of previous research instead of reviewing them.

Move 2 step 1 B which is called Indicating a Gap also turned out to be different from what was observed in research article introductions written in English. This is because evaluating past research which is central to this step in English research articles, was found to be missing in the Thai introductions. Instead, Thai researchers simply pointed to the insufficiency or the absence of research on the topic in the relevant area of study.

Jogthong attributes the above variations on the model to the effort made by Thai writers to save face and to respect a rigid system of seniority. Thai writers seem to have found it inappropriate to criticize the works of their colleagues. Thus, Thai writers preferred to describe and summarise previous research and leave it for their readers to evaluate and make their own judgements or to merely point to what has not been done in the relevant field.

Similar to Jogthong (2001), Loi & Evans (2010) did a comparative analysis of research article introductions written in English and Chinese in the field of educational psychology. They analysed forty introductions, twenty Chinese and twenty English, also using the CARS model (Creating a Research Space) presented by Swales (1990). They found that although Chinese writers used all three major moves of the research article introduction identified by Swales (1990), they were used to a lesser degree than in the English articles. The writers suggest that the less frequent use of these features in the Chinese introductions may be attributed to Chinese social norms and social values grounded in Confucian teaching. Strong criticism of the work of others in public would generally be seen by Chinese as embarrassing and bringing shame upon them. The reluctance to take a strong critical stance could also be prompted by the Confucian principle of zhong yong (the constant mean) (Analects as cited in Loi and Chen 2010), which values the adoption of the middle way between two extremes. In relation to writing, strong negative evaluation of another person’s work would be akin to placing oneself in a hostile position in relation to that person. To avoid such extremes, writers would be cautious of using negative evaluation when identifying the gaps in past research.
Taylor and Chen (1991) compared the introductions to papers written in a variety of related disciplines (geophysics, metallurgy and mineral processing, materials science, and materials engineering) by three groups of physical scientists: Anglo-Americans writing in English, Chinese writing in English and Chinese writing in Chinese. They used a schema proposed by Swales (1984) after studying the rhetorical structure of introductions to a variety of research papers. The schema consists of four moves: establishing the field by showing centrality, by stating current knowledge or by ascribing key characteristics; summarizing the relevant previous research; preparing for present research by pointing to a gap or unresolved problem in the previous research or by raising a question about it; and introducing the present project by stating its purpose or objectives or by outlining what is to be done.

Taylor and Chen found that while there was an underlying rhetorical structure common to all three language groups, there were also variations from the structure which were characteristic of culture and or discipline. A major cultural variation was the reluctance shown in Move 2 by both groups of Chinese scholars to identify by name and to summarize the work of others whom they would then be required to critique in the following move (Move 3), which focuses on the gaps or the shortcomings in previous research. They attribute this variation to the scientific tradition of China where debates between peers were not the norm as in the Greco-Western tradition (Needham, 1969; Graham 1973 as cited in Taylor & Chen 1991). The concept of acquiring knowledge through discussion of alternative views does not appear to have been the defining characteristic of the Chinese scientific tradition. In spite of this explanation, Taylor and Chen also suggest that the reason for not summarising previous research could have been due to the scarcity of bibliographic sources in China.

Basthomi (2009) examined the Background of the Study section in fourteen doctoral prospectuses written in English by Indonesian students of English as a Foreign Language in the State University of Malang, Indonesia. He stresses the importance of showing a research space in a doctoral prospectus similar to the research article as has been advocated by Swales (1990), because this ability demonstrates that a researcher is knowledgeable about research carried out in the relevant research field. Swales (1990) stipulates that in order to create a research space, a writer needs to relate the current study to the related research in the area.

Basthomi observes that the best way to create a research space is to provide a critical review of previous studies, particularly if the current study is an empirical study that requires field data collection. However, he found that although the proposed doctoral projects were empirical studies, the prospectuses he analysed either provided a review of concepts or merely a positive evaluation of the previous research. As the prospectuses did not provide a negative evaluation of the previous empirical findings, they lacked negative justification for the proposed research. He found the same issue in his recent research on research articles written by Indonesians (Basthomi 2006 as cited in Basthomi 2009).

Similar to Adnan referred to in this study (Adnan 2004 as cited in Basthomi 2009), Basthomi also found only a small number of citations in the doctoral prospectuses. He acknowledges the cultural and practical reasons put forward by Adnan to account for this phenomenon – the scarcity of bibliographic sources in Indonesia, the low income of academics, Indonesia's strong leaning towards orality rather than literacy based on the written word and the still under-developed academic culture of Indonesia. However, he avers that this does not give the total picture.

Basthomi attributes the evasion of negative evaluation that he observed in doctoral prospectuses and research articles to the difficulty Indonesian researchers experience in explicitly critiquing or opposing or countering previous researchers. In Indonesian culture where one is not expected to excel as an individual, critiquing and more specifically negatively evaluating others would be seen as belittling them.

Morales (2012) examined eight research articles written by Japanese writers, with special focus on how they handled the conclusion section of the articles. He used the Conclusion Model of Yang and Alison (2003 cited in Morales 2012) to make comparisons between the conclusion sections of the articles. The model consists of three moves: summarising the study; evaluating the study; and deductions from the research. Of these, the Japanese writers considered only Move 1, summarising the study as mandatory. Therefore, instead of indicating the probable contributions that their research might have made to the field, the Japanese writers merely provided a brief summary of the main points of their research. Morales observed an affinity between this type of conclusion and the
concluding stage generally found in Japanese prose, where writers tend to refrain from expressing strong opinion.

The researchers discussed above found that although the written samples they examined corresponded to the model proposed by Swales (1984, 1990) in principle, there was also some variation from the model. However, there was not much consensus in relation to the explanations put forward to account for the variation. While everybody acknowledged that cultural factors played a role, some also put forward other factors as possible reasons for the observed differences. As the scarcity of research resources, financial difficulties experienced by academics in finding relevant resources and an academic tradition that is still in the process of developing were cited as reasons, it is important to examine how opinion is expressed in other genres that are not influenced by such factors.

The studies discussed above all used frameworks proposed by Swales (1984, 1990) or Yang and Alison (2003 cited in Morales 2012) to analyse the introductions and conclusions of research articles. The frameworks consist of rhetorical moves and steps observed by the proponents in the introductions and conclusions of research articles written by English writers. These frameworks were considered appropriate for these studies because they helped the researchers determine whether individual writers adopted all the rhetorical moves observed in the introductions and conclusion, and also what exactly they did within each rhetorical move.

Martin and White (2005) developed a taxonomy of several elements to evaluate various stances adopted by writers in journalistic discourse towards the material they present. The two main elements of the taxonomy are called ‘reporter voice’ and ‘writer voice’, the former consisting of no authorial inscribed judgment and the latter consisting of inscribed authorial judgment. This means that in the first category, values of judgment that occur are mediated through attribution to an external source, while in the second category, the responsibility for such value judgments are taken by the journalistic writer. This taxonomy provides a useful tool that is sensitive to the different authorial presences of journalistic writers, which in turn indicates the level of subjectivity or objectivity present in the discourse. As objectivity is commonly considered to be a quality of good journalistic writing, the taxonomy facilitates comparison between journalistic writers in terms of the quality of their journalistic discourse. Such comparisons would usually be made across writes within the same culture. As the purpose of the current study is to compare the variations in opinion expression across different cultures, it was considered that a framework that consists of rhetorical moves similar to the framework devised by Swales would be more appropriate for the study. While this kind of framework allows researchers to find out whether rhetorical moves used in a certain discourse in one culture are present in a similar discourse in another culture, it also helps them to look for any variation that occurs within each rhetorical move. Therefore, the framework observed by van Dijk (1983, 1996) in English news reports, which consists of several rhetorical moves, was considered to be appropriate for the current study. More information about this framework is given in the next section.

Current study

To address the above issues, this study examined how opinion is expressed in news reports written by native Chinese and Japanese writers. This genre was chosen as it is a well-developed genre in the two cultures and is also not affected by the availability of bibliographic resources, unlike academic genres. Chinese and Japanese writers were chosen as they have a strong cultural affinity particularly due to the important role that Confucian thinking plays in their cultures. In addition, intercultural communication between these countries and Western countries is vibrant today, in terms of both international business and education due to the rapid growth of the two economies.

How the study was conducted

The news texts used in the study consisted of ten Chinese and ten Japanese news reports. The Chinese news reports were extracted from the People’s Daily Online. The Japanese news reports were extracted from the electronic versions of the Asahi Shimbun and the Yomiuri Shimbun. These newspapers were chosen as they are reputed, well established national newspapers, and can therefore, be taken as the national standard for writing styles, including the way in which opinion is expressed. All the news reports were about international events. The topic of the news reports was
controlled by limiting it to international news to ensure that the topic would not create variation across the different news texts. This was identified as an important factor in Taylor and Chen (1991).

In order to examine how opinion is expressed in the news reports, they were first analysed into their component parts and functions by using a framework proposed by van Dijk (1983, 1996) based on his observations of English news reports. The framework consists of moves as in the framework proposed by Swales for research article introductions and is based on the format of news reports generally followed in English language newspapers. The framework provides a useful analytical tool to understand cultural differences in how opinion is expressed in news reports. A comparative analysis was done to identify where exactly and how the Chinese and Japanese differ from the model for English news reports.

Van Dijk’s framework for news reports consists of three main categories and several sub-categories that indicate the functions of the respective parts of the text.

1. Summary/Introduction
   1.1 Headlines (with super-, main-, and sub-headlines, and captions)
   1.2 Lead

2. Episodes (s)
   2.1 Events
      2.1.1 Previous Information
      2.1.2 Antecedents
      2.1.3 Actual Events
      2.1.4 Explanation
         2.1.4.1 Context
         2.1.4.2 Background
      2.2 Consequences/Reactions
         2.2.1 Events
         2.2.2 Speech acts

3. Comments
   3.1 Expectations
   3.2 Evaluation

The Summary category functions as the introduction to the text. It consists of the sub-categories of Headline and Lead. The Summary category introduces the main events, participants, the location and time of the news story.

The Episodes category consists of two main sub-categories: Events and Consequences. The Events sub-category consists of several mini-categories. The main part of the events sub-category is actual events which is the core of the news story and which describes the current events now in focus. The mini-categories of Previous Information and Antecedents lead into the actual event, Previous Information reminding the reader of information given earlier or elsewhere in the newspaper, and Antecedents providing information about the facts that precede the actual event that may or may not have been reported before. The mini-categories of Explanation, Context and Background provide further information about the actual event in terms of why and how it happened, the backdrop against which it happened, and historical, cultural or political information about the actual event.
The Consequences sub-category consists of two mini-categories: Events and Speech Acts (verbal reactions of actors in the news story). The mini-category of Events covers the actions and events that immediately follow the actual event and that may be seen as caused by the actual event. The mini-category of Speech Acts contains quoted declarations of immediate participants, particularly of leading national and international politicians who express opinions or comments on the news events. The mini-category of Speech Acts provides the political implications and evaluations of an event (van Dijk, 1986).

The Comments category contains two sub-categories: Expectations and Evaluation. It carries the beliefs of the journalists and the newspaper they represent. It includes conclusions, expectations, speculations, and other evaluative information about the events. Although opinion in the Comments category may not be personal, it is necessarily political and ideological because it presupposes beliefs and attitudes of a social, political or cultural nature. The sub-category of Expectations is likely to carry implicit evaluation because expectations may be derived only from what others say or from general knowledge about the political situation in a country. In contrast, in the Evaluation sub-category, journalists explicitly express opinions (personal ones or those of the newspaper) about the actual news event. While Expectations imply reference to future events, Evaluation explicitly features evaluative expressions (good, bad, unfortunate, controversial, and so on) about the news events (van Dijk, 1986).

How opinion is expressed in Chinese and Japanese news reports

The analysis of the Chinese news reports showed that only two of the three categories in van Dijk’s framework were employed in all the news texts. These categories are the Summary category and the Episodes category. The Chinese news stories departed from van Dijk’s framework in two major ways. This is because some news stories deleted a category while the others added a new category to the framework. The category that was deleted was category 3, the Comments category. This occurred in five of the ten news stories. A new category was added in the other news stories to replace the Comments category in van Dijk’s model. This category provided an elaboration of previous information instead of opinion.

In van Dijk’s model, the Previous Information category occurs in the Episodes category, which occurs just before the Comments category. The Previous Information category occurs under the sub-category of Events and provides information given earlier or elsewhere in the newspaper. This category therefore provides repetitive information. The new category that was added to some of the Chinese news reports provides more information of this type. Placing it where the Comments category is expected to occur is therefore a notable variation on van Dijk’s model. It shows the writer’s preference for factual information over expressing opinion about the news report. It suggests that for some Chinese journalists, contextualisation of the event is more important than expressing their opinion about the event, and that redundancy is not frowned upon in the Chinese literary tradition.

Another striking feature of the Chinese news reports is that none of them had the Consequences category. This is an important category as it refers to actions and events that are seen as caused by the actual event and also provides the reactions of important figures to the event through quoted declarations. The Consequences category therefore provides the political implications and evaluations of the actual event. The absence of the Consequences category together with the variations performed on the Comments category reduce the level of opinion expressed in the Chinese news stories.

The analysis of the Japanese news reports showed that the three categories specified in van Dijk’s model – Summary, Episodes and Comments- were used in seven of the ten Japanese news stories. The other three news reports departed from van Dijk’s model because they did not have the Comments category at the end. Although the proportion of news reports that deleted the Comments category is not very high, this finding shows that there is a strand of writers who tend to write news reports without this category. In addition, not all the news reports that had the Comments category had the Evaluation sub-category. This means that evaluation was expressed implicitly in some of the news reports through the sub-category of Expectations.

Although the Japanese news reports conformed with van Dijk’s framework better than the Chinese news reports, the deletion of the final Comments category was common to both to some extent. This
practice suggests that most of the Chinese and some of the Japanese news report writers tend to refrain from expressing opinion at the end of the news texts. Also, in the Japanese news reports, when opinion was expressed at the end of the news reports, it was expressed implicitly rather than explicitly.

To sum up, the framework observed in the Chinese news reports departed from van Dijk’s framework due to the deletion of the Comments category or the addition of the Previous Information category that provided factual information to replace the Comments category. The Chinese news reports also did not have the Consequences category which provides information about the effect of the actual event and the opinion of the main participants about the actual event. The framework observed in the Japanese news reports departed from van Dijk’s framework due to the deletion of the Comments category in some news stories. Moreover, the news reports that had the Comments category, did not always express opinion explicitly.

Both the Chinese and Japanese news reports show that the writers evaded the expression of opinion where it usually occurs in English news reports. The Chinese writers achieved this by either eliminating the Comments category or replacing it with factual information by elaborating on the Previous Information category, and also by eliminating the Consequences category. The Japanese writers achieved this by eliminating the Comments category or by expressing opinion indirectly in the Comments category.

The reluctance or reticence shown in relation to the expression of opinion in Chinese and Japanese news reports confirm the findings of previous research into written business communication, classroom discourse and written academic discourse. Past research conducted in all three domains in relation to Chinese and Japanese and other Asian discourses showed that expressing opinion about others, especially when it amounted to criticism or disagreement with others was either avoided or done in a very mild, indirect manner. This quality has been attributed to social norms observed in Asian societies, such as the value attached to the collective common good, the inappropriateness of criticizing the work of colleagues in public which amounts to bringing shame and embarrassment upon them, the lack of importance given to excelling as an individual, especially at the expense of critiquing and negatively evaluating others, the Confucian principle of adopting the middle way which helps to avoid placing oneself in a hostile position in relation to others, and the adoption of a scientific tradition which did not encourage debates between peers (Bastommi 2009; Carson and Nelson 1994; Connor 1988; Jogthong  2001; Loi and Chen 2010; Morales 2012; Needham 1969; Taylor & Chen 1991; Waikato 2004).

**Conclusion**

The findings of the present study revealed that the writers of both Chinese and Japanese news reports refrained from expressing opinion where opinion is generally expressed in English news discourse. This was done by either deleting the categories where opinion is expressed in van Dijk’s model, or by replacing them with new categories that do not convey opinion. Sometimes, the opinion category was delayed by the addition of a new category containing factual information, which showed the writer’s preference for this kind of information. The observed variations were more pronounced in the Chinese news texts than in the Japanese.

The results of the current study confirm the findings of previous research that found a notable reluctance in Asian writers to express their opinion in oral as well as written communication. The findings have significant implications for inter-cultural communication in the business and education sector because they show that reticence and indirectness are still quite prevalent in modern Asian discourse even in a written genre as universal as news reports. While opinion expression is a key component in business interactions and negotiations, how opinion is expressed can either make or break the links between business participants. Therefore, it is in the interest of Western business managers to be aware of this cultural difference and act in culturally sensitive ways when engaging in business dealings with these cultures. Similarly, Asian business managers need to understand that reticence and indirectness may be interpreted by their Western counterparts as a lack of direction and enthusiasm.

The findings of the study also have significant implications for international Asian students because opinion formulation and expression are central to the literary tradition of higher education in western countries. In this tradition, both undergraduate and postgraduate students are constantly expected to...
engage in critical reading of academic material and formulate opinion about what they read. They are also expected to express their opinion related to academic topics both orally and in writing in tutorial discussions, seminars, oral presentations and in numerous forms of academic writing. The formulation and expression of opinion is even a more pressing requirement for research students who are expected to formulate research questions, write literature reviews, evaluate and discuss research results, defend their own research, and write and publish research articles.

Although expressing opinion is commonplace in western higher education contexts, results of the present study show that ways of expressing opinion can vary between Asian and western discourse communities. Swales (1990) defines a discourse community as a group that is founded on shared discoursal patterns and expectations. Therefore, international students from Asia, particularly those who belong to academic discourse communities in their own cultures, need to familiarise themselves with the discourse styles and conventions used in the corresponding western discourse communities, and use them appropriately in their writing. In order to achieve this, they need to understand how the conventions differ and re-learn what is appropriate for their new discourse communities.

References


