

Corpora and Intercultural Studies 4

Xinghua Liu
Anne McCabe

Attitudinal Evaluation in Chinese University Students' English Writing

A Contrastive Perspective

 Springer

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 Springer

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Chapter 1

Contrastive Rhetoric

1.1 Introduction and Origins

This book contributes to the store of knowledge gleaned through studies in contrastive rhetoric (hereafter abbreviated as CR), a research focus whose appearance on the applied linguistic scene is traced back to 1966 with the publication of Robert Kaplan's seminal article "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education", in the journal *Language Learning* (Kaplan 1966). At the time of that publication, a great deal of research in language learning centered around contrastive analyses of languages, mainly on their phonology and morphosyntax, in order to highlight where language learners might have problems in learning a second, or foreign, language. Kaplan (1966) pointed out that the focus on phonology and morphosyntax was also the trend in language teaching, but he argued that students who master syntactic structures of a second language often cannot write what would be considered an adequate composition or essay in that language. This lack of ability, according to Kaplan, can be explained by the fact that different cultures use different writing structures which capture differing ways of sequencing thought. He posited that English language and rhetoric is influenced by Anglo-European culture and Platonic-Aristotelian thinking patterns and thus Anglo writers prefer linear and direct/deductive paragraph development in writing. He highlights that it "is not a better nor a worse system than any other, but it is different" (Kaplan 1966: 3) and held that logic and rhetorical practice are culture specific and influenced by cultural conventions.

In that widely-circulated study, Kaplan (1966) pointed out that, when a second-language (L2) student writer does not follow the expected paragraph structure in English, teachers and examiners may feel that the "foreign student paper is out of focus because the foreign student is employing a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader" (Kaplan 1966: 4). To illustrate the different thought structures, Kaplan drew on different kinds of texts. He used examples from the Bible to illustrate that Arabic writing

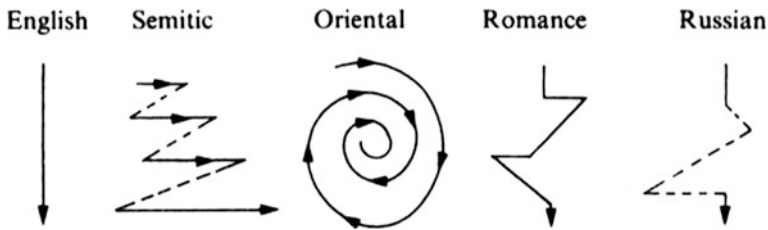


Fig. 1.1 Diagram of cross-cultural differences in paragraph organization (Kaplan 1966: 15)

(which can be generalized to writing in other Semitic languages) is characterized by complex coordinating elements, and then demonstrated the effect the inclusion of these types of structures can have using Arabic L2 writers' paragraphs. He used an excerpt from a philosopher translated to English to demonstrate the digression which can be found in writing in the Romance languages; he similarly illustrated a slightly different type of digression by including a translation of a text from Russian. He then illustrated the effects of digression in texts written by a French and a Latin American student writing in English as their L2. Of greatest interest to this volume is what Kaplan (1966: 10) had to say about Oriental writing:

Some Oriental writing... is marked by what may be called an approach by indirection. In this kind of writing, the development of the paragraph may be said to be "turning and turning in a widening gyre." The circle or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly. Things are developed in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are.

Here he highlights again the effects the different thought patterns can have on the English reader: "such a development in a modern English paragraph would strike the English reader as awkward and unnecessarily indirect" (ibid: 10). This article came to be known as the 'doodles' article because of the inclusion of arrow drawings to indicate these different ways of sequencing thought (Fig. 1.1):

Most important for Kaplan in writing this article was raising awareness so that teachers of writing to L2 students could consider the need for their students to understand that there are differences in expectations in writing across cultures, and thus be able to help L2 writers produce more effective prose. A contrastive analysis of rhetoric, he argued, could "help the foreign students to form standards of judgement consistent with the demands placed upon him by the educational system of which he has become part" (ibid: 15).

1.2 Criticisms of Early Contrastive Rhetoric

Kaplan's (1966) article came under criticism for many reasons. First of all, it was seen as an ethnocentric privileging of Anglo writing (Hinds 1983; Spack 1997; Zamel 1997; Kubota and Lehner 2004), as well as a reduction of individual students

to monolithic cultural groups, leading to the possibility of “imposing an ethnocentric ideology and inadvertently supporting the discourse that represents cultural groups as stable or homogeneous entities” (Spack 1997: 773; see also Zamel 1997). It further seemed to assume that the reason that an essay by an L2 writer did not follow expectations of an essay written in English was because of interference from the L1 writing culture (Kubota and Lehner 2004), ignoring other factors such as the writer’s level of writing development in their L1 and/or in English as an L2 (Mohan and Lo 1985). Also, Kaplan’s article was criticized for its comparison of student writing to professional writing, and for choosing analysis of written products over writing processes (Leki 1991). Another criticism was that it used writing manuals, rather than actual instances of effective writing, to make statements about what writing should be like and how it should be organized (Leki 1991). Finally, Scollon (1997) suggested that traditional CR research exhibited “an excess of focus on textual comparisons” (ibid.: 356) while saying “nothing about strategies of persuasion, audience influences, and the like that are the heart and soul of Aristotelian rhetoric” (ibid.: 353). Kaplan himself kept abreast of the criticisms over the years; in 1987, he (Kaplan 1987: 9) acknowledged that the argument in the 1966 paper may have been oversimplified:

In that study, I tried to represent, in crude graphic form, the notion that the rhetorical structure of languages differs. It is probably true that, in the first blush of discovery, I overstated both the difference and my case.

Kaplan, who has remained an active researcher in the field, has revised his initial position over the years (Grabe 2005), acknowledging, for example, that differences in rhetoric are “as likely, if not more likely, to reflect cultural and educational training factors as it is to reflect linguistically guided preferences from the L1” (ibid: 149).

1.3 Expansion of Contrastive Rhetoric

Ulla Connor (1996, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2011), a major proponent of CR, has made immense contributions to the field by paying attention to the concerns of its critics in her theoretical and applied studies, thus helping the field grow and develop so that CR analyses can avoid the pitfalls of static and reductionist stereotypes. Her theorizing in CR has led her to propose a multi-layered intercultural rhetoric model which incorporates three different but related theories and methods. Using a post-modern mapping tactic which is useful in “conducting positionings of research that are reflexive and show relationships visually and spatially” (Connor 2008: 305), she combined insights from theories and methods referring to:

1. writing as a socially constructed activity and process;
2. small and large cultures;
3. inter-cultural and cross-cultural communication.