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# LEARNING TO WRITE ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Review by Kwah Poh Foong

## INTRODUCTION

In the process of learning to compose in a second language, second language writers (L2) will inevitably rely on the writing practices that they have acquired in their first language (L1) to help them communicate their ideas. Research in L2 writing has shown the influence of L1 in students' texts as well as strategies used in the writing process. In his pioneering work on contrastive rhetoric, Kaplan (1966) hypothesized that the rhetorical system of one language and culture could be different from another. Native speakers of different languages and cultures employ different rhetorical devices to organize information, relate ideas, and indicate the purpose of text. The work of other contrastive rhetoric researchers (Eggington, 1987; Purves, 1988; Hinds, 1990; Connors, 1996) have provided further evidence on preferred rhetorical styles between cultures and the influence of L1 rhetorical patterns on L2 writing. Similarly, research in genre analysis (Swales, 1990) and intercultural communications (Scollon and Scollon, 1995) have indicated differences in discourse patterns and conventions in different discourse communities. However, researchers have stressed that in addition to the preferred rhetorical patterns of presenting ideas, second language learners also possess other rhetorical strategies to help them communicate. As second language teachers, we need to be aware of our students' preferred rhetorical styles to help us understand the difficulties that students may have in communicating in another socio-cultural context. Such

insights are also valuable in helping us develop learning tasks that could help our students understand the differences in preferred rhetorical styles between their L1 and L2.

The aim of this paper is to review and focus on studies that examine the preferred rhetorical patterns of Asian and English as a Second Language (ESL) writers' texts and discuss some pedagogical implications for teachers of second language writers.

## CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC RESEARCH ON ASIAN WRITERS

Work done on contrastive rhetoric focuses on two areas of research: analysis of translated texts and analysis of students' essays.

### 1. Research on Asian Translated Texts

Studies in contrastive rhetoric of translated texts from native languages have provided some evidence on Asian preferred rhetorical patterns. These texts were translated sentence by sentence without manipulating the original organizational framework. These studies seem to suggest that the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean rhetorical styles share a similar four-part pattern. Hinds (1990) did extensive work on Japanese translated expository prose and some work on Korean and Chinese prose. These studies indicated that the preferred rhetorical pattern of Japanese is *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu*, which has originated from classical Chinese poetry. Similarly, the

work of Liu (1990) on translated Chinese texts also revealed the basic four-part structure of *chi-cheng-juan-he*. Eggington (1987) analyzed Korean texts and found that the preferred rhetorical structure, *ki-sung-chon-kyul*, appears to be similar to Japanese and Chinese rhetorical patterns. The four-part rhetorical structures of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese are compared and shown below.

The first two parts of this rhetorical structure do not appear to pose any problems to native readers of English. What is contrastive and interesting here is the third part – the “turn” or the introduction of an indirectly related or contrasting subtheme. It is the introduction of a subtheme or turning viewpoint that would interfere with the thematic logical progression of the text and create some confusion for English-speaking readers as it violates the logical expectations of the text. In the English rhetorical pattern, after the introduction of the thesis of the essay, the reader expects the rest of the supporting ideas to be directly related to the thesis. As a result, the inclusion of a subtheme that does not seem to be directly related to the thesis, would be perceived as irrelevant and digressive by readers of English.

## 2. Research on ESL Students’ Texts

In analyzing expository paragraphs written by foreign students in the United States, Kaplan (1972) found the discourse structure of Chinese and Korean students’ writing to be indirect and non-linear. According to him, the students’ texts were

*“... 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 circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is not looked at directly (p.301).”*

Similarly Choi’s (1988) comparison of Korean and American students’ argumentative writing in English showed that essays of Korean speakers exhibited a non-linear structure.

In her study of Chinese students, Matalene (1985) illustrated how an essay written by one of her Chinese students in China exhibited some characteristics of

Chinese	Japanese	Korean	Rhetorical Structure
<i>chi</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>ki</i>	Exposition of main theme
<i>cheng</i>	<i>shoo</i>	<i>sung</i>	Development of theme
<i>juan</i>	<i>ten</i>	<i>chon</i>	Introduction of a subtheme or ‘turn’ that is not directly connected to the main theme.
<i>he</i>	<i>ketsu</i>	<i>kyul</i>	Conclusion.

the ba gu form, the eight-legged essay. The standard pattern of this form is:

*“Exposition of the theme [which] was followed by a discussion of its significance; then came the argument itself followed by the ‘turn’ in the argument; at the end, carefully balanced conclusions were set forth” (p.797).*

Fagan and Cheong (1987 p.25) investigated the rhetorical patterns used by ninth grade Singaporean Chinese students in their written compositions and provided evidence to show the rhetorical influence on students’ writing. From their analysis of sixty compositions, they found that about 50% of the compositions exhibited the rhetorical pattern of Chinese Classical Poetry of *chi-cheng-juan-he*, which had a four-part pattern: “beginning, development, introduction of a related or contrasting subtheme, and a conclusion”.

Another rhetorical feature exhibited in students’ essays is that the purpose or thesis of the text is either rather ambiguous or not known to the reader until the final paragraph, which Hinds (1990 p.98) refers to as “*delayed introduction of purpose*”. Kirkpatrick’s (1992) study of Chinese written request letters also indicated that the requests appeared toward the end of the letter. Kobayashi (1984) studied essays written by American and Japanese students and found that American students preferred the general-to-specific pattern while Japanese favoured the specific-to-general pattern. Placing the purpose at the end of the text could confuse English-speakers on the purpose of the essay. In most English expository essays, one would

expect the purpose or thesis of the essay to be introduced at the beginning and be logically developed throughout the essay without any shift in focus, following a linear pattern of development. Below is an example of a Chinese ESL student’s essay exhibiting the preferred rhetorical pattern of *chi-cheng-juan-he*.

Different types of wedding ceremonies in China and Singapore

**[Chi - Exposition of the main theme]**

When people talk about a country’s culture, usually they will talk about one or a few things to show the particular culture instead of talking about every segment of it because a certain culture may include too many things to describe in details. In my essay, I intend to talk about the differences between the wedding ceremonies in China and those in Singapore to show one side of China’s culture different from Singapore’s culture from my own experiences in both countries.

**[Cheng - Development of theme]**

I have been in Singapore for only half a year and I didn’t attend any Singaporean’s wedding ceremony. What I have learned about the ceremonies in Singapore is from a lecture held in NIE a couple of weeks ago and one of my friends in Singapore who has attended several wedding ceremonies. The wedding ceremonies in Singapore are quite simple compared with those in China (which will be talked about in my essay later), and the procedure of one wedding ceremony is similar to the procedure in China (because of limited space, I can’t tell you in details). The new couple always send out invitations to their relatives and good friends before the wedding ceremony and have a simple dinner party for both the hosts and guests.

What about the wedding ceremonies in China? I have taken part in several wedding ceremonies in my hometown. From my experiences I find that the most different point (compared with the wedding ceremonies in Singapore) is the scale of the dinner party. Usually in a wedding ceremony in China, ten or more tables are needed for the guests! The food and beverages are luxurious. So we can see such a wedding ceremony must cost a lot of money. Yes, it's true. But it's known to everyone that the level of living conditions in China is not high. Then how can people afford such expensive wedding ceremonies? They save money. In some poor areas in China, parents often begin to save money for their children's wedding ceremonies since the children are born!

**[Juan - Introduction of a subtheme or turn that is not directly related to the main theme]** Do you think the money and time spent on such extravagant wedding ceremonies is worth. Every knowledgeable person will so "No!". A wedding ceremony is only a type of rite to show that the bride and bridegroom will become a couple after the ceremony. It is actually a waste to spend a lot of money on a wedding ceremony and to spend a lot of time on saving the money!

Things become more serious when a kind of competing atmosphere is created. People keep comparing whose wedding ceremony is more luxurious, and they want to hold the most luxurious wedding ceremony in their area.

Why not use such a large amount of time and money to do other useful things for society? Why not use them to make our living standard higher? why spend them on such a meaningless thing? I think from this point, such luxurious wedding are monies [which] are obstacles of China's development. They prevent our society from developing fast!

**[He - Conclusion]** Before I came to Singapore, I didn't learn the harm of the luxurious wedding ceremonies in China. After half an year's life in Singapore seeing the rapid development of Singapore, and after learning about Singapore's wedding ceremonies, I think now one of the most important things for us Chinese to do is to remove the traditional opinion regarding the wedding ceremonies so important and to make these ceremonies much simpler. Then I'm sure China will develop much faster.

In this essay, the writer's intention of the essay appears to discuss the differences between the wedding ceremonies in China and Singapore as reflected in paragraph 1 [*chi*]. In paragraphs 2 & 3 [*cheng*], the writer develops the thesis by describing the differences. The turning of viewpoint begins at the end of paragraph 3 and the argument begins in paragraph 4 which questions the worth of spending money and time in extravagant wedding ceremonies. The writer further develops his argument against spending time and money on weddings in paragraphs 5 and 6 [*juan*]. This shift could confuse native readers of English with regard to the purpose of this essay. At the beginning, it is stated that the essay is going to be a discussion on differences of wedding ceremonies, but the focus is shifted to an argument. Only in reading the concluding paragraph [*he*] is the writer's opinion and intentions known. It appears that the author's intention is to argue against elaborate wedding ceremonies rather than to discuss ceremonial differences as suggested in the beginning. Therefore, this student writer prefers an inductive pattern in which the purpose of the essay is introduced at the end of the essay.

## CONCLUSION

Research in contrastive rhetoric has indicated how different languages could have different preferred rhetorical styles and shown how the basic rhetorical patterns of three Asian languages could be reflected in students' writing as well as translated texts. Such research has also provided insights into the writing practices

of different cultures which could influence how students write. If the way we present our ideas is important in making our meaning understood, second language learners have to be made aware of such cross-cultural rhetorical differences. Not knowing them may result in miscommunication or misunderstanding because of the ambiguous nature of language.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

In teaching learners to write across languages and cultures, it is important for teachers to bear the following considerations in mind.

**1. *Be aware of L1 and socio-cultural influences that students bring to their learning process.***

Such awareness could sensitize teachers to the needs and feelings of students learning to communicate in a discourse system with different conventions.

**2. *Understand that L2 learners have to cope with a heavier learning load when compared to L1 students.***

Besides having language difficulties, these students need to struggle with the unfamiliarity of the conventions of another language and culture. It would be unfair to perceive these students as cognitively inadequate or unintelligent when they do not write according to the readers' expectations of a particular discourse community.

**3. *Raise students' awareness about the differences in their L1 and L2 writing through specific genre analysis and discussion of readers' expectations.***

Students should not be made to think or feel that one discourse pattern is better than the other. Teachers do not need to impose the cultural values of native English speakers on their students, but rather raise their awareness of different factors that are involved in structuring the text, which would include the readers' expectations of certain organizational patterns.

**4. *Integrate genre analysis as part of the revision process after students have generated their own ideas and written their drafts.***

This could prevent highly controlled and guided writing which does not promote invention and creativity.

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