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Contrastive Rhetoric and Teaching of ESL Writing

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Abstract

By reviewing the evolution of contrastive rhetoric, and the development of ESL writing teaching, this thesis presents the close relationship between the two and the positive influence of contrastive rhetoric on the teaching of ESL writing. This thesis also explores the new directions of contrastive rhetoric studies from two aspects: expansion and postmodernist influence and discusses the implications for ESL writing.

Keywords: Contrastive Rhetoric, ESL Writing, Culture, Thought Pattern, Postmodernism, Intercultural Communication

I. Introduction

Contrastive rhetoric as a research field came into existence with Robert Kaplan's 1966 study, in which Kaplan made the pronouncement that "each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system" (Kaplan, 1966:14). His study had provided insights into problems ESL students encountered while adjusting to English rhetoric by referring to rhetoric strategies of their first language and began to influence ESL writing teaching immediately. With the growing of contrastive rhetoric, its position of shaping writing class has been enhanced but also seriously challenged. However, as a living and breathing research field, contrastive rhetoric is adjusting itself all along to tackle challenges and criticism by means of expanding itself to encompass new dynamics brought by postmodernists and globalization. This thesis will present the impact of contrastive rhetoric on the teaching of ESL writing from the inception of the study to its maturity as a research field. And it concludes that contrastive rhetoric cannot blossom on its own without ESL writing providing it with meaningful research topics.

II. The introduction of contrastive rhetoric and its impact on the teaching of ESL writing

In 1966, Robert Kaplan published his seminal paper "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," which marked the birth of contrastive rhetoric. Influenced by the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that "language influences thought," Kaplan put forward his idea based on three main assumptions: Speech and writing are cultural phenomena; Each language has a set of writing conventions unique to it; Linguistic and rhetorical conventions of a first language interfere with writing in a second language. After analyzing more than 600 essays, Kaplan identified general rhetorical patterns used in academic writing for five different cultural

groups. In contrast to the western linear development of ideas, he found that Semitic style prefers co-ordinate structures; the Oriental opts for circular progression; the Romanic tends to ramble, and the Russian sounds weighty with lengthy sentences and lexical redundancy. This ground-breaking research has been considered as the first major study that attempted to analyze how first language culture manifests in a second language or foreign language writing. Kaplan argued that ESL students' writing, especially their paragraph organization, exhibited the students' L1 cultural thought patterns.

Valuable in establishing contrastive rhetoric as a new field of inquiry, it also created widespread influence on the teaching of ESL and EFL writing. The diagrams of rhetorical patterns Kaplan proposed was widely printed and dominating the thinking, learning, teaching, and writing of teachers and students. For some time, many ESL and EFL writing books and teachers' handbooks printed the diagrams, and it seemed that Kaplan had established the standard for teaching writing. According to Ann Raimes:

It has led to compensatory exercises that offer training in recognizing and using topic sentences, examples, and illustrations. These exercises often stress imitation of paragraph or essay form using writing from an outline, paragraph completion, identification of topic and support, and scrambled paragraphs to reorder. (1991:409)

Thus, Kaplan's pioneering study shed new light on ESL and EFL writing. But many more questions were raised by his study and needed to be answered.

III. The development of contrastive rhetoric and the changing faces of the teaching of ESL writing

Actually, the evolution of contrastive rhetoric is comparable to making an adjustment to meet the challenges and be responsive to criticism, which conversely mobilized contrastive rhetoric to acquire new dynamics constantly. The practitioners continuously enrich the field by modifying, refining and redefining contrastive rhetoric and its influence.

3.1. The growth of contrastive rhetoric

After the initial success, contrastive rhetoric experienced a period of stagflation in the 1970s. The development of text linguistics or discourse analysis didn't give contrastive rhetoric the supposed more scientific base because text linguists then viewed texts simply as units larger than sentences, or as a sequence of sentences. "This focus yielded atomized, disparate bits of information that seemed either to be incapable of explaining differences in larger segments of discourse or almost to trivialize the differences." (Leki, 1991:125) Therefore, patterns generalized in this period were not broad enough to lead to pedagogic effects.

The 1980s, however, witnessed the flourish of contrastive rhetoric as a research field. Progresses achieved in discourse analysis and text linguistics aroused renewed interests in contrastive rhetoric. In the early 1980s, Kaplan and Connor organized five annual colloquia at the international TESOL Conference which attracted active researchers of the field such as John Hinds, Bill Eggington, Shirley Ostler, Bill Grabe, Nils Enkvist, Lars Evensen, Sauli Takala, and Alan Purves. (Connor, 2008) John Hinds, an American linguist of East Asian languages who specialized in Japanese also made a major contribution to the growth of the field. Inspired by Kaplan's work, Hinds began to study original, non-learner texts in their own languages. He provided several fruitful studies in contrastive rhetoric, focusing on the four-part ritual discourse structure in Japanese. He published extensively on Japanese rhetoric in 1976, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1987 and 1990 respectively. Alan Purves and his colleagues worked for the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement Study of Written Composition embarked on their study in 1980. They collected and analyzed the high school exit essays of 20,000 12-, 14- and 18- year-old students in 14 countries. They created a large database to support their findings and provide for other scholars' research needs. "In 1984, the Annual Review of Applied Linguistics devoted an entire issue to contrastive rhetoric"(Leki, 1991:126). In 1987, Robert Kaplan and Ulla Conner co-edited *Writing across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*. This book has been regarded as the "first-ever edited volume of empirical and text analytic contrastive rhetoric studies" (Connor, 2008:299). And Purves' thought-provoking publications also sparked interest in contrastive rhetoric research, especially his 1987 book, *Writing across Languages: Issues in Contrastive Rhetoric*.

Since the 1990s, among contrastive rhetoric researchers, there has been an increasing interest in "cognitive and social variables of writing in addition to the linguistic variables (Connor, 1996:18). This shift has led to expanded concept of contrastive rhetoric and moved it away from focusing on the effects of transfer from L1 to L2 writing towards an interdisciplinary area of cross-language and cross-culture study thanks to the theories and methods of such related fields as applied linguistics, composition and rhetoric studies, anthropology, translation studies and discourse analysis (Connor, 2002). According to Connor, some internal and external forces caused this shift. The internal forces came from criticism which called on contrastive rhetoric to move forward and take advantage of progress made in the analysis of discursive features as well as processes and contexts of writing. The external forces derived from new developments in discourse analysis and changing focuses on first language composition research.

3.2. The changing faces of the teaching of ESL writing

Silva divided ESL writing instruction into four stages: the controlled approach, the current-traditional rhetoric approach, the process approach, and the social approach. For Silva, each stage had a clear focus. The first stage was dominated by the controlled or guided approach which was influenced by structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology. This approach regarded learning to write as an excise of habit formation. Students were trained to practice sentence patterns and vocabulary by means of writing. The second stage concentrated on current-traditional rhetoric approach under the influence of Kaplan's landmark work. It regarded learning to write as identifying and internalizing organizational patterns. The major approach in the third stage of ESL writing teaching was the process approach. This approach put a premium on developing efficient and effective writing strategies. And the social approach in the fourth stage reckoned that learning to write was part of becoming socialized to the discourse community—finding out what is expected and trying to be accepted by the community. These four major approaches of writing instruction are grounded in four research fields related to writing practice. They are contrastive rhetoric, cognition, communication and social constructionist theory (Silva, 1990).

Raimes also classified L2 writing instruction into four stages with distinctive focuses. According to Raimes, the first stage focused on form. When the audio-lingual method was the dominant mode of instruction, the writing was given a marginalized role of reinforcing oral patterns of language. Thus, writing practice took the form of sentence drills—filling in the blanks, replacing words or parts of the sentences, changing the forms, and completing the sentences. "The content was supplied. The writing reinforced or tested the accurate application of grammatical rules" (1991:409). Raimes believed the second stage moved its eyes on writers. "Influenced by L1 writing research on the composing process, teachers and researchers reacted against a form-dominated approach by developing an interest in what L2 writers actually do as they write" (ibid). And Raimes thought this attention to the writer as active learner and creator of text led to a process approach. To Raimes the third stage marked a shift of attention from the process of writers to content and the expectations of the educational institutions. During this period, "an ESL course might be attached to a content course in the adjunct model or language courses might be grouped with courses in other disciplines" (Raimes, 1991:411). Learners were taught to use the language to think as well as to shape the content. And in the fourth stage, readers became the focus. Writing practice was regarded as "socialization into the academic community—not as humanistic therapy" (qtd. Raimes, 1991:412).

Even if Silva and Raimes used a different way to trace the changing faces of ESL writing teaching, their affinity is clear, and the influence of contrastive rhetoric research can also be tracked down.

3.3. Contrastive rhetoric and teaching of ESL writing

Connor has reviewed the studies of contrastive rhetoric during the past 30 plus years and identified four domains of its investigation. These areas include: text linguistics, the analysis of writing as a cultural and educational activity, classroom based studies of writing, and contrastive genre-specific studies. And Connor specified the purpose of each area of investigation. Contrastive text linguistic studies aim at examining, comparing and contrasting how texts are formed and interpreted in different languages and cultures using methods of written discourse analysis. Studies of writing as cultural and educational activity mainly attempts to investigate literacy

development on L1 language and culture and examine effects on the development of L2 literacy. Classroom-based contrastive studies tend to examine cross-cultural patterns in process writing, collaborative revisions, and student-teacher conferences. Genre-specific investigations are largely applied to academic and professional writing (Connor, 2002:498).

Placing the four domains of the contrastive rhetoric investigation against the backdrop of the four stages of ESL writing teaching, the influence of contrastive rhetoric studies on ESL writing teaching and practice is always felt, and the significance cannot be ignored.

There is no doubt that the “concern for rhetorical form was the impetus for Kaplan’s influential 1966 article that introduced the concept of contrastive rhetoric” (Raimes, 1991:409) when the controlled approach or focusing on the form according to Raimes dominated the first stage of writing instruction. The large amount of contrastive rhetoric researches have generated heat and light in ESL writing teaching and pushed it to move its eyes from form to process.

It seemed that process approach practitioners and proponents would turn their backs on contrastive rhetoric when they maintained that “contrastive rhetoric research examined the product only, detaching it from and ignoring both the contrastive rhetorical context from which the L2 writer emerge and the processes these writers may have gone through to produce a text” (Leki, 1991:123). And they also argued that contrastive rhetoric studies’ focus on product resulted in the prescriptive nature of writing instruction. In English this is the standard, if you want to write well, you have to follow this standard and imitate our patterns. But giving up on contrastive rhetoric also drove process approach to the dead alley of hedging to give a direct response concerning the L2 writing problems students met. Apparently to argue that L2 writing problems were those of any developing writer or were the usual difficulties of inexperienced writers simply doesn’t hold water. In addition, proponents of process approach couldn’t justify their practice if they discarded the revealing findings of contrastive rhetoric researches that writing strategies do transfer across languages and ESL students might employ strategies acquired for specific L1 writing context to their L2 writing (Leki, 1991). Could writers grasp the idea of the organization while it is downplayed or totally omitted from instruction? So, it seems that contrastive rhetoric became a missed link in the stage of ESL writing teaching when process approach was the king.

Raimes’ third stage is content-based which means it mainly concerns the content and tasks L2 students can expect to encounter in their academic careers. And Raimes contended that “the research studies that inform this approach include analysis of the rhetorical organization of technical writing” (1991:411). Connor regarded it as genre-specific investigations.

When the focus of ESL writing instruction was shifted to readers, most scholars believe social constructionism contributed to this change. Social constructionist writing teaching invested the idea that writing constitutes a mode of communication in an academic or discourse community into ESL writing practice. In practice, this social approach or reader-based approach combines an emphasis on form with process approach. Raimes said, “this indicated a return to a form-dominated approach, the difference being that now rhetorical forms, rather than grammatical forms, are presented as paradigms” (1991:412). Research in classroom-based studies conducted by Allaei and Connor, Hull, Nelson, and Carson examined cross-cultural discourse patterns in process writing, collaborative revisions, and student-teacher conferences. These researches found that cultural misunderstandings appear in many classroom situations, such as conversation, collaborative groups, peer revision, and teacher-student interactions. These findings also contributed to the cultural awareness within a writing discourse community. Besides Hinds highlighted reader versus writer responsibility in successful communication. He categorized the rhetoric forms of various cultures according to the workload the readers were required to undertake to make inferences to interpret the writers’ intentions. He distinguished reader-responsible rhetoric and reader-response rhetoric. He classified Japanese as using reader-responsible rhetoric; English as using writer-responsible rhetoric and Chinese as being in transition from a reader to a writer responsible rhetoric. Hinds’ classification illuminated the social approach writing instruction by means of observing rhetoric patterns to ensure communication can be accomplished.

Therefore, on the one hand, contrastive rhetoric studies provide ESL writing teaching with momentum to improve itself, but on the other hand ESL writing also enriches contrastive rhetoric studies while it is making adjustments to tackle criticism from ESL practitioners. Considering the four stages of ESL writing teaching, contrastive rhetoric at least benefits ESL writing in four aspects. Firstly, "contrastive rhetoric studies will help avoid stereotypes based on failing to recognize that preferences in writing styles are culturally informed" (Leki, 1991:137). Secondly, ESL students acquire the awareness that the way they construct written ideas in their own language is different from the way idea should be constructed in English. And they should try to express themselves in line with the English patterns, a customary way of expressing ideas in English, which doesn't necessarily means the "otherness" of their own culture. Thirdly, "students who are having trouble writing in English and who are made aware of cultural differences in rhetoric view themselves not as suffering from individual inadequacies," (ibid 138) and this meta-cognitive awareness is an important insight for inexperienced writers to develop. Last but not least, contrastive rhetoric studies will foster ESL writers' reader awareness thus facilitate successful communication within the discourse community and maybe beyond the community.

IV. New directions of contrastive rhetoric and its implications for the teaching of ESL writing

4.1. New directions of contrastive rhetoric

Since its emergence, contrastive rhetoric has encountered numerous criticisms for its reductionism or over-generalization, determinism, prescriptive nature, and ethnocentrism. But contrastive rhetoric researchers never put up passive defensive walls to hedge against criticism; they take active measures to expand their research scopes to correct its defects instead.

When Kaplan put forward his idea that his ESL students' writings looked puzzled to readers of native English speakers because of the influence of their own cultural thought patterns, it was innovative for three reasons. First, at that time few ESL instructors concerned themselves with writing styles; Second, the focus of both linguistic and language teaching was on the sentence level rather than discourse level; third, people did not believe writing could be taught (Connor, 2008). Thanks to his continuous quest and to efforts of all other researchers, forty years later, contrastive rhetoric can still generate innovative ideas. Kaplan's own writing in 2002 and 2005 are clear examples of how contrastive rhetoric is still moving forward (ibid).

And the new directions of contrastive rhetoric can be discussed from two perspectives: expansion and postmodernist influence.

Kaplan's 2005 article presented his model of concerns in contrastive rhetoric and called on researches to cope with the complexities of second language writing. Connor acknowledged the dynamic nature of discourse and culture and voiced the need to study how writing in given cultures is tied to the intellectual history and social structures of these cultures. She pointed out:

Changing definitions of written discourse analysis—from text-based to context sensitive—and of culture—from static to dynamic—contribute to the changing focus of intercultural rhetoric research, a new turn that better reflects the dynamic nature of the area of study (2004:302).

John Hinds' study in text linguistic area, Purves and Carson's examination of cultural, cognitive and social aspects of writing broadened the horizons of contrastive rhetoric. Besides, classroom-based contrastive studies, genre-specific investigations of academic and professional writing in different languages and cultures also expanded the researches of contrastive rhetoric.

Thus, Connor is justified to declare contrastive rhetoric has always been multidimensional in its research and use one chapter to discuss the expansion of contrastive rhetoric in light of new understanding in discourse analysis, cultural studies and intercultural communication in the new book, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric* (Connor, 2008:300-302). Connor even proposed a name change from contrastive rhetoric to intercultural rhetoric.

Contrastive rhetoric like any other studies is itself a process. While the 1980s represented a golden era in contrastive rhetoric research, as of the 1990s, contrastive rhetoric was dominated by expansion and trying to answer the challenges of postmodernists by way of adopting postmodernist perspectives. Connor mapped the umbrella concept of intercultural rhetoric using three postmodern maps. Connor depicted intercultural rhetoric from three dimensions: the text in context theory, the intertwining of large and small cultures in discourse, and interaction and accommodation in intercultural communication (2008:306-307).

According to Connor, writing is a socially constructed activity and process. The studying of writing should not be limited to texts but take the discursive and social practice environments into consideration. So it's important to consider the multimodality of text when studies of the production and consumption of texts across languages and cultures are conducted. As to the intertwining of small and large cultures, Connor raised her concern about the need to understand other interacting social and educational influences that could be overlapping with national cultural norms and bear on the writing process and products. This concern is the development of Atkinson's models to define cultures suitable for contrastive rhetoric research. For accommodation, Connor was inspired by Speech Accommodation Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory. Connor conducted an ethnographic study about a Finnish fish dealer who adjusted his style of fax writing to the level of his interlocutors and argued that SAT and CAT was a valid tool to understand written communication given the background of globalization and the widespread of the Internet which slanted the written communication towards oral type.

4.2. The implications for the teaching of ESL writing

Raimes said, in her 1991 article, that "writing instruction is less clearly defined now in 1991 than it was in 1966.... Now teachers have to consider a variety of approaches their underlying assumptions, and the practices that each philosophy generates (1991:412). Almost twenty years have elapsed when Raimes made the observation. Postmodernism has become a prevailing force in almost all academic research fields, and globalization is a fact of life which threatens to change the nature of written communication in a lot of areas especially business, and media communication. Thus, the new directions of contrastive rhetoric will provide for the demands of teachers to generate new and meaningful approaches. It will guide ESL writing instructions to the right track.

V. Conclusion

ESL writing has been the major research area of contrastive rhetoric and accompanying it to get through all the ups and downs of its development. Through expansion and adjustments made to tackle the criticism of postmodernists and meet the challenges that emerged with globalization, contrastive rhetoric finds new directions. But it is impossible for contrastive rhetoric to blossom on its own; ESL writing will serve as an anchor to generate new and meaningful topics for contrastive rhetoric studies continuously.

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