

## A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC ANALYSIS

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### **Abstract:**

Based on the notion that different speech communities have different ways of organizing ideas in writing reflecting their cultural thought patterns, Contrastive Rhetoric Theory has argued that these differences might cause failure of communication for language learners. Since this theory has inserted a long-lasting influence on the language education, the present paper attempts to present an evaluative review of the theory. The review indicates that the Contrastive Rhetoric Theory still has a dominant role in EFL/ESL teaching.

**Key words:** intercultural rhetoric analysis, culture, EFL writing skill

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## Introduction:

Dissatisfied with the work of earlier linguists who tended to impose on Native American Languages grammatical descriptions based on the categories suitable for their own Indo-European language, Boas (1858-1942) argued that a linguist's task is to discover for each language under study its own particular grammatical structures, developing descriptive categories appropriate to it (Gumperz & Levinson, 1996).

Boas's main contribution to the idea of connection between language and culture was the idea that the way languages classify the world is arbitrary, and each language has its own way of building up vocabulary that divides the world and establishes categories of experience.

Later on Boas's students namely Edward Sapir (1881-1939) and Benjamine Lee Whorf (1897-1941) made an important contribution not only to American Linguistics but to the study of language in general (Duranti, 1997). Their studies on American Indian Languages and the relationship between language, thought and culture resulted in a hypothesis named Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which later on formed the "theoretical foundation for Contrastive Rhetoric" (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p. 15).

The hypothesis consists of two interrelated parts: Linguistic Relativity claiming that languages which differ radically in their vocabulary and structure express different cultural meanings, and Linguistic determinism which, in its strong version, assumes that patterns of thought and perceptions of reality are determined by one's native language. (Johnson & Johnson, 1999)

According to this hypothesis "one's native language influences and controls thought consequently barring second language acquisition" (Connor, 1999, p. 29). In other words, "the way in which we conceptualize the world depends on the particular language we speak" (Finch, 2005, p. 229).

Although the strong version of the hypothesis, the idea that language controls both thought and perception, has been questioned, the weak version of it has recently gained plausibility as the result of the research conducted by Hunt and Agnoli (1991). They argue that in the process of translation there is a loss involved. That is, "an utterance which is completely

natural in one language may be completely unmanageable in another. This supports the weaker version of the Whorfian hypothesis “that language influences thought” (Connor, 1999, p. 29).

Being influenced by the hypothesis, the American applied linguist, Robert Kaplan (1966) initiated a study aiming to prove that language and writing are both cultural phenomena. He studied the expository essays of some ESL students to find out their preferred rhetorical patterns. Based on the results of the study, he graphically classified the emergent patterns as linear, parallel, indirect and digressive. Kaplan elaborated 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 mastering of its logical system.” (1966, p. 20). He coined the phrase “contrastive rhetoric” to describe the differences he had seen, and he began to encourage instructors to use this research in their classroom (Purves, 1988).

This study, in fact, helped Contrastive Rhetoric to establish itself as a new field of study in the 1960s aiming to respond “to the needs of American colleges and universities facing an increased number of international and immigrant students who needed to acquire the discourse conventions of English academic writing” (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p. 11).

### **Definition of Rhetoric:**

In studying rhetoric analysis, the issue of what is understood by the term *rhetoric* needs initially to be clarified. Traditionally, rhetoric has been defined as the ancient art of argumentation and discourse (Wheeler, 2003). It comes from the Greek word *rhetor*. It is also defined as a speaker skilled in addressing the law courts and large gatherings of people in order to persuade (Appleford, 2003; Jankiewicz, 2005). Rhetoric originates from the theory or the study of how, by means of what linguistic devices, a speaker or writer might best achieve the aim of persuasion. From the time of Aristotle the concept of rhetoric has always been connected with aspects of discourse that are intended to persuade (Connor, 1999).

Rhetoric originated from the functional organization of verbal discourse, and its object is eloquence defined as effective speech designed to influence and to convince others. It operates on the basis of logical and aesthetic modes to affect interaction in both an emotional and rational way. Rhetoric is the study of effective speaking and writing. It is a form of speaking which has

the intention of making an impact upon, persuading, or influencing a public audience. Rhetoric in this sense implies a negative attitude as it suggests a skilful orator who aims at winning the argument without having any concern for truth. So in the past the term rhetoric had negative connotations (Conner, 1999).

### **New Definition of Rhetoric:**

A less traditional definition, however, has considered it in a more positive way and referred to rhetoric as a study “which typically focuses on how to express oneself correctly and effectively in relation to the topic of writing or speech, the audience, and the purpose of communication” (Richards et al., 1990, p. 245). It is defined by Leech (1983) as “the effective use of language in communication (p. 15). Language users usually acquire this ability according to certain conventions, many of which have to do with their cultural heritage of society rather than the structure of the language (Heath, 1983).

Writing in this sense is more than a skill to be learned through memorization. Rather, it is a process of shaping meaning and is therefore most likely to be influenced by the culture. McDaniel comments:

Every language-culture has its preferred ways of constructing discourse, that is, of organizing, expressing, and connecting thoughts, out of all the conceivable devices. Cultures will demonstrate different attitudes and values in establishing their preferences; some devices will overlap between cultures, some will be unique. All writers, then, use systems for structuring discourse that suits their sense of logic for the occasion. (1994, p. 30)

From this point of view a number of scholars have conducted studies under the title of *contrastive rhetoric analysis* focusing on rhetoric and the analysis of written text to get a deeper understanding of how they are structured. More specifically, contrastive rhetoric is an area of research in applied linguistics that tries to identify composition problems encountered by second language writers and by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, it attempts to explain them (Connor, 1999). This area of study pays special attention to the role of transfer from native language to the target language.

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) have defined contrastive rhetoric as a discipline which “seeks to describe the typical rhetoric structures in the writing of different languages with a view to showing how they differ and thus how the rhetorical structure of writing in the L1 influences the L2 writer” (p. 53).

Contrastive rhetoric analysis, according to Flowerdew (2002), attempts to study the preferred expectations about how information is organized in different languages and cultures with the aim of using the results in the practical writing classes and the development of pedagogic material as well.

### **Kaplan:**

American applied linguist Robert Kaplan (1966) was the first scholar who initiated a study to show that both language and writing are cultural phenomena. He tried to illustrate the fact that, in the process of writing, the rhetorical patterns of the first language would likely be transferred to the students’ ESL writings. Of course the issue of transfer was not a new issue by itself, that is, it had already been studied in behaviorism (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Based on this school, first/native habits influenced the acquisition of the second or foreign language habits at syntactic and phonological levels.

However, Kaplan was the first scholar who emphasized the interference in rhetorical strategies, differences in organizing the discourse in different languages and coined the term “contrastive rhetoric” (Noor, 2001, p. 256).

Being influenced by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in his seminal article, *Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education* (1966), Kaplan studied the expository essays of ESL students to find out their rhetorical patterns. The study was based on his holistic analysis of 500 international students’ English essays. After analyzing the essays, he graphically classified the emerged patterns as: linear development of English language, the parallel development of Semitic languages, the indirect development of the oriental languages and the digressive patterns of Roman and Russian languages. These five divergent patterns, referred to as “doodles” (Kaplan, 1987, p. 10), were attributed to the native cultures of the writers.

In other words, Kaplan argued that the thought pattern in English language is linear, that is “an English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic statement, and then, by a series of subdivisions of that topic statement, each supported by examples and illustrations, [the writer] proceeds to develop that central idea...” (Kaplan, 1966, p.13). In Arabic Language, as an example of Semitic languages, the development of the paragraph is based on “parallel construction”, that is, it tends to rely on coordinate constructions (use of and, therefore, but). In Chinese language, as an example of Oriental languages, the paragraph development is indirect. “A subject is not discussed directly but is approached from a variety of indirectly related views” (Conner, 1999 p. 15). Roman and Russian languages were considered digressive as most of the information loaded in the paragraph was unnecessary or irrelevant to the topic.

Based on his findings, Kaplan commented 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 mastering of its logical system” (1966, p. 20).

Considering Kaplan’s finding, it seems logical to accept that different cultures would orient their discourse in different ways, as described above. Even different discourse community within a single language such as constituted by different academic disciplines, have different writing conventions and norms: Preferred length of sentences, choice of vocabulary, acceptability of using first person, extent of using passive voice, degree to which writers are permitted to interpret, amount of metaphorical language accepted. Thus, if different discourse communities employ differing rhetoric, and if there is transfer of skills and strategies from first language to second language, then contrastive rhetoric studies can reveal the shape of those rhetorical skills and strategies in writers from different cultures.

Kaplan’s study is of great importance for a number of reasons. First of all, he was the first one who argued against the linguistic theory that was prevalent in 1950 and 1960, the theory that considered the sentence as the basic unit of syntax. This theory, he argued, resulted in a sentence- based analysis of linguistics. Alternatively, Kaplan considered the paragraph as the unit of analysis (Kaplan, 1972). Specifically, studies on the logical development of paragraphs became widespread thereafter.

Secondly, Kaplan introduced a kind of text –analysis based on “discourse blocks” and “discourse units” (Connor, 1999, p. 32). That is, he analyzed the texts by referring to their central

and supporting ideas. In fact, he was encouraged to look at the EFL students' writing from a different prospective.

Thirdly, Kaplan established contrastive rhetoric as a new discipline in linguistics that examines differences in languages at the discourse levels. Kaplan, in fact, termed it "contrastive rhetoric", using "contrastive" in response to the contemporary interest in text linguistics, discussed above, and "rhetoric" to describe the fact that this notion was culturally embedded (Kaplan, 1988).

The initial purpose of contrastive rhetoric was pedagogical. It aimed at meeting the needs of teaching international students learning to write academic English compositions.

For this reason, there are some classroom procedures associated with contrastive rhetoric analysis (Kaplan, 1966). Teachers may scramble a normal paragraph into numbered sentences and ask students to rearrange the sentences in away that appears to them as a normal paragraph. At the end, the students should be presented with the original version of the paragraph. The other type of task is to give the students a topic sentence and ask them to list and group relevant topics and supporting sentences in an outline form and then use the outlines to write their compositions.

Kaplan's ideas have been criticized by some opposing pedagogical researchers and on the other hand, some other researchers have provided some evidence of rhetorical differences rooted in culture establishing a foundation for the cultural aspect as a basis of contrastive rhetoric. The following section presents a critical review of contrastive rhetoric.

### **Contrastive Rhetoric Analysis:**

Kaplan's 1966 study integrated the study of language and its uses as reflections of culture. Furthermore, it helped to extend the scope of linguistic studies beyond words and sentences into the structure of discourse. However, some scholars by referring to the study as "Traditional" contrastive rhetoric, tried to criticize it (Conner, 1999, p. 18).

It has been argued that Kaplan's conception of culture consisted of a closed system that considered "culture as based largely on distinct geographical and national entities which are presented as relatively unchanging and homogeneous" (Connor, 2002, p. 503).

While attempting to construct a “dynamic model” of contrastive writing theory, Matsuda (1997) emphasizes the complexity of culture, asserting that there are many other factors, besides the writers’ own native culture, influencing the rhetorical structure of a piece of writing. In other words, factors such as shared knowledge between writer and reader, discourse community, and personal experience of the writer can be named as factors that may affect the writing. In the same vein, Atkinson (2002) declares that it is contrary to common available evidence to relate all rhetorical differences to the single national style of writing.

The idea that all writers in English develop their paragraphs in a linear way (one of the findings of Kaplan’s 1966 study), was not compatible with the subsequent findings of Braddock (1974). Analyzing 25 essays written by professional writers in five American journals, he came to the conclusion that development of the paragraphs varied from writer to writer. Specifically, only 13% of the paragraphs had begun with a topic sentence and 3% ended with a topic sentence. This suggested that it was not possible to generalize Kaplan’s claim about paragraph development.

Other researchers, namely Mohan and Winnie (1985), conducted a study on the English writings of foreign students who were in their developmental process of learning. They analyzed the 3700 essays of the students who were busy studying in two different grades, Grade 8 and 12. They found that in terms of paragraph organization, Grade 12 students were significantly superior to grade 8 students. So they came to the conclusion that one cannot really deduce the paragraph structure in a language from ESL students’ writings.

Using students’ L2 texts for eliciting information on their L1 rhetoric pattern was another source of criticism. As it is clear, many external factors like students’ personal experiences, their L2 proficiencies, and different instructional methods that they have already gone through may have a role in their L2 writing.

Traditional contrastive rhetoric has also been criticized “for being too ethnocentric and privileging the writing of native English speakers” (Connor, 1999, p. 16). It has been argued that the traditional study has indirectly “reinforced an image of superiority of English rhetoric and a deterministic view of second language (particularly English learners as individuals who inevitably transfer rhetorical patterns of their L1 in L2 writing)” and “has tended to construct



static, homogeneous ... images of the rhetorical patterns of various written languages” (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p. 15).

Reinforcing the voice of criticism, Silva (1991) argues that “from the perspective of this version of current-traditional rhetoric, writing is basically a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and the paragraphs into prescribed patterns. Learning to write, then, involves becoming skilled in identifying, internalizing, and executing these patterns”. (p. 14) It has also been argued that these activities which are, in fact, the classroom implications of the theory, discourage creative thinking of the students reducing the writing task into a filling- in activity.

In a critical article, Matsuda (1997) has evaluated contrastive rhetoric. In an effort to develop a model of L2 writing that can help teachers place insights from contrastive rhetoric studies into teaching ESL writing, Matsuda has discussed a “static theory of L2 writing” (p. 47) which is claimed to be the underlying pedagogical approach to the teaching of L2 based on the early rhetoric studies. According to him, early rhetoric studies suggested a theory of L2 writing that is static by nature.

Holding a mechanistic view of the writer, this theory views the writer as a writing machine that is supposed to create a text by reproducing the patterns supplied by his linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. In this model, the other potential factors that might influence the writing have been ignored. The major problem with this model, Matsuda argues, is its assumption about the context of writing. That is, “in static model of L2 writing, the writer’s and the reader’s backgrounds- linguistic, cultural and educational-are the only elements that constitute the context of writing” (p. 50). It has been argued that, in general, the model has the following problems:

- 1) It has ignored the writer’s autonomy.
- 2) It advocates a prescriptive methodology.
- 3) It has equated textual features with the writer’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

All these negative features have caused some teachers to dismiss the contrastive rhetoric-based teaching of writing together with the valuable insights provided by contrastive rhetoric studies. However, Matsuda, by making use of insights generated by rhetoric studies, presents an alternative model of writing labeled as a “dynamic model”. (p. 52)

The three key features of this model are: a) writer's and reader's backgrounds, b) shared discourse community, and c) interaction of the elements that have important roles in the model. The background feature not only includes linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds, but also includes many other aspects like variations within the writer's native language and knowledge of the subject matter. The shared discourse, "the agreed set of mechanism of intercommunication among the members" (Swales, 1990, p. 26) is actually knowledge shared by writer and reader that affects the text. The interaction feature, on the other hand, shows the interrelationship among the elements of the model that transforms the writer's and reader's backgrounds.

Based on contrastive rhetoric studies, this dynamic model voids the problems that we noticed in the static model. As one can see, the textual organization has been treated in the model as well.

As a reaction to the early criticism on contrastive rhetoric studies, Kaplan in his later publication was modest enough to admit that he had "made the case too strong". He then clarified that all forms [of rhetoric patterns] were possible in every language, however each language had "certain clear preferences" (Kaplan, 1987, p. 10).

With reference to the classroom application of contrastive rhetoric, specifically to the ideas criticizing the theory for reducing the writing activity to identifying the paragraphs and patterns, we must remind that for advanced students having the awareness on building grammatical sentences--though it is one of the basic steps in writing--is not enough for good writing. There is more to writing. Raising students' awareness of rhetorical organization of the languages would enable them to put and arrange their flow of thought in the form of grammatical sentences into patterns that are acceptable in the target language. So, the mentioned classroom procedures are in fact the means for raising that kind of awareness.

Meanwhile, regarding the views of Kubota and Lehner, we may argue that to some extent they are correct in viewing language and culture as dynamic; however, language and culture cannot be greatly changed in a short period of time. In fact, the rhetorical tastes and thought patterns that may have been developed over the country's long history and have rooted in the culture resist being easily changed into new types of rhetoric. Maybe it is for this reason that "despite many past attacks on contrastive rhetoric, the time has not yet come to dismiss it as a

viable theory of second language writing” (Connor, 1999, p.18). Even Matsuda after his careful evaluation of early contrastive rhetoric, comments that:

The study of organization in written discourse has been and will continue to be an important part of L2 writing research. Pedagogical implications of contrastive rhetoric studies should not be dismissed because of the problems with the early attempts to apply the findings of contrastive rhetoric research. Because textual organization is one of the areas with which ESL students have most difficulties, it needs to be taught in ESL writing classrooms, but it needs to be taught in ways that are informed by an appropriate theory of L2 writing. (Matsuda, 1997, p. 58)

Reflecting a paradigm shift in traditional contrastive rhetoric analysis, Connor (1999) has mentioned two forces, “internal” and “external” (p. 18), that have caused contrastive rhetoric to change its perspective from purely structural descriptions to the one that takes into account cognitive and socio-cultural variables as well.

The internal forces came from criticism of contrastive rhetoric, briefly mentioned above, made the study to take into account the processes and contexts of the writing and move beyond traditional linguistic parameters. External forces, on the other hand included the new development in discourse analysis and changing focus in first language composition research that together played an important role in broadening the scope of rhetorical and discursal studies. However, as Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) have pointed out, contrastive analysis “survived these criticisms by... broadening its frame of reference to include text linguistics, genre analysis and cultural theories of writing” (p. 53).

### **Conclusion:**

To sum up this critical review, it can be argued contrastive rhetoric analysis can be regarded as an explanatory framework for studies pertaining to teaching writing skill in EFL/ESL setting for two important reasons. First, the theory has considered ‘culture’ and ‘writing’ as intertwined. That is, students’ writings can be partly influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Second, our own experience as a teachers of EFL writing along with some

empirical studies have demonstrated the acceptability of claims made by contrastive rhetoricians, persuading me to reflect Matsuda's words:

The accumulating evidence from contrastive rhetoric research warrants the view that linguistics, cultural and educational backgrounds have some influence on the organizational structures of ESL text, although they are by no means the only factors. (Matsuda, 1997, p. 48)

In fact, one can trace the continuing influence of contrastive rhetoric analysis that are reflected in the literature, and using Silva's own words "one could make a strong case for the notion that the contrastive rhetoric is still dominant in ESL writing materials and classroom practices today"(1991, p. 15).

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