

Cultural Collisions in L2 Academic Writing

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Learning to write in English for academic purposes presents a significant challenge for non-native speakers. Not only must they deal with the obvious linguistic and technical issues such as syntax, vocabulary, and format, but they must also become familiar with Western notions of academic rhetoric. (West or Western in this article refer primarily to North America.) Collisions of cultures are experienced when the discourse practices L2 writers are expected to reproduce clash with what they know, believe, and value in their L1 writing. For this article I reviewed a range of literature that addresses writing and culture. Described by researchers and by L2 writers are collisions regarding voice, organization, reader/writer responsibility, topic, and identity. Implications for writing pedagogy include awareness of contrastive rhetoric on the part of ESL writing instructors; instructors' acknowledgement of and appreciation for the prior knowledge that students bring from their L1; realization on the part of ESL writing instructors that Western notions of, for example, voice are indeed just notions and are simply one way among many of expressing oneself; and a need for open discussion with students about how they might incorporate standard Western notions of writing without compromising their own identity.

Apprendre à écrire en anglais pour des fins académiques présente un défi de taille pour les locuteurs normatifs. Ils doivent non seulement assimiler les notions linguistiques les plus évidentes, telles la syntaxe, le vocabulaire et le format, mais aussi se familiariser avec les notions occidentales de rhétorique académique (dans cet article, occidental fait référence principalement à l'Amérique du Nord). Il se produit des collisions culturelles quand les pratiques discursives que les écrivains L2 sont censés reproduire heurtent leurs connaissances, leurs croyances et leurs valeurs en L1. Pour écrire cet article, j'ai passé en revue toute une gamme de documentation touchant la rédaction et la culture. Les chercheurs et les écrivains en L2 y décrivent des collisions impliquant la voix, l'organisation, les responsabilités lecteur/écrivain, le thème et l'identité. Parmi les conséquences pour l'enseignement de la rédaction, notons la conscientisation de la présence de rhétorique contrastive de la part d'enseignants en ALS; la reconnaissance et l'appréciation par les enseignants des connaissances antérieures que retirent les élèves de leur L1; la réalisation de la part des enseignants en ALS que les notions occidentales sur, par exemple, la voix, sont justement des notions, c'est à dire, une façon parmi plusieurs de s'exprimer; et la nécessité d'une discussion franche avec les élèves

sur l'intégration de notions occidentales dans leurs rédactions qui ne compromettent pas leur propre identité.

To be academically literate in English, second language students have to acquire not only linguistic skills, but also the preferred values, discourse conventions and knowledge content of the academy. (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 147)

How realistic is it to regularly expect or demand of our NNS students that they basically become someone else? (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, p. 56)

Introduction

In any of its modes of expression, language is never neutral. "Every sentence dreamed or realized jumps like a pulse with history and takes a stand" (Brand, 1990, n.p.). Western notions of academic writing are not neutral, not objective, and not universal. A variety of rhetorical issues such as audience, organization, and voice have significant cultural implications and variations, but I limit the scope of this article by paying particular attention to the notion of voice. I look both to the research and to experiences described by learners themselves for my information. I draw on contrastive rhetoric, critical theory, and issues of affect/identity. Simply describing the challenges that L2 academic writers face is not a productive place to stop, however. To address pedagogical implications, I look to dialogism, contrastive/connective analysis, common classroom routines, and the Freirian notion of the pedagogy of freedom. I conclude by suggesting how one experienced writing teacher (myself) might adjust her practice in the light of what she has learned from her review of the literature.

Expectations of Academic Writing—Elsewhere and in the West

"A broad range of the world's peoples adopt models and norms diametrically opposed [to Western notions of voice]: they foreground subtle, interpretive, interdependent, non-assertive and even non-verbal characteristics of communicative interaction. (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996, p. 22)

What is valued in academic writing? Across cultures, writing both as a process and as a product is approached differently. Non-native speakers rely heavily on strategies from their L1 writing (Connor, 1996; Cumming, 1989). Connor cites text analyses performed by a number of researchers who found that "this transfer involves ... recurring patterns of organization and rhetorical conventions of students' first language and culture" (p. 4). It seems most important, then, for writing instructors to become familiar with some of the findings of (or at least the existence of) contrastive rhetoric to learn what is

expected and admired in the writing of other cultures. I mention a few variables. In the West writing is often regarded as a vehicle for self-expression, whereas in Japan, according to Carson (1992), language is viewed less as a tool for self-expression than as a medium for expressing solidarity and shared social purpose. Hinds (1987) notes that generally speaking, when the Chinese write the onus is on the writer to make things clear (as it is in English), whereas the Japanese are more likely to expect (perhaps respect) the reader to make sense of the text. The intent is to "stimulate the reader" (Hinds, 1990, p. 62) rather than to convince him or her.

Organizing text in the Western style may be difficult for non-native speakers. Purves (1986) cited in Kecskes and Papp (2000) refers to "rhetorical communities" (p. 114); in his studies of the discourse pattern of a particular topic among writers from a number of different cultural backgrounds, he found similarity of style. For example, the presentation style of a Russian writer may well begin by listing facts about the topic, seemingly unconnected, with the main point coming toward the end of the article. This, note Kecskes and Papp, may easily upset a native speaker of English who is not familiar with that style. Leki (1992) observes that conventions of argumentation in English writing call for facts, statistics, and illustrations; other cultures "rely heavily on analogy, intuition, the beauty of the language, and the opinions of the learned of antiquity" (p. 92). Leki describes the Chinese approach to writing as "clearing the terrain before getting to the core" (p. 96), similar to what Shen (1998) calls "bush-clearing" (p. 132), whereas we in the West position our core up front. I mention a few other rhetorical communities and other variables. Kachru (1986, cited in Kecskes & Papp, 2000) says that Indians writing in English might well use the discourse structure of Hindi, that is, cyclical, spiral, and nonsequential, and she relates this to cultural differences. Repetition and flamboyance are expected in Arabic writing (Leki, p. 100). Thielmann, (1999) addresses the differences in introductions to text: an introduction written by a German speaker may be excluded from reception by an English speaker because it does not seem to reveal what it is about. This difference is further supported by Thielmann's finding that advance organizers, seen as extremely helpful by English scholars, are not seen as helpful by German scholars. Evidence is yet another variable. Kaplan (1990) notes that cultures have different notions of what constitutes evidence, the "optimal order in which evidence is to be presented, and the number of evidentiary instances that need to be presented in order to convince the reader" (p. 10). Leki notes that personal experience simply does not count in some cultures: "Quoting famous people is what constitutes evidence" (p. 68). As well, the topic of writing assignments may create tension. For example, Leki notes that assigning the subject of religion to Japanese students is not appropriate. In addition, writing on topics that happened in the L1 might be more difficult to write about in the L2. Friedlander's (1990) studies found

that what is experienced in one language is often best described in that language. Michaels (1996) uses an expressive phrase for this notion: “an alphabet with memory” (p. 101). Writers then may be tripped up in many ways in accommodating the discourse patterns of the L2: writing variations include responsibility for making sense of the text, position of topic, organization of material, introductions, purpose of writing, evidentials, and writing about experiences that happened in another language. One other important variable is the expression of self in writing, that is, the notion of voice, and it is to this topic that I now turn.

Voice: Perspectives From Researchers and Learners

Atkinson (2001) defines voice as “the cult and culture of personal opinion” (p. 108). If voice is regarded as representing the person behind the writing, and that person’s culture trains him or her to background himself or herself and his or her opinions, then Atkinson’s definition is itself imbued with Western cultural beliefs. Voice, in my view, should not automatically assume assertion of opinion. Voice, when referring to the person behind the writing, would be more culturally accommodating as a neutral term, requiring adjectives to give it character. These adjectives might be *assertive*, *restrained*, *absent*, *deferential*, or *hesitant*, to reflect better the range of selves that are present or absent in writing practices across cultures. In the West the word *voice* used alone implies strength, confidence, and individuality, and the absence of these qualities equals the absence of voice. I would argue that voice—the *I* of the writer—is always there if one looks hard enough (or creatively enough). It is there in the decision to write at all, in the choice of topic, in the choice of examples, even in the decision to remain in the background. The question to me should perhaps not be “Do students represent themselves in writing?” but “How do students represent themselves in writing?”

Some L2 writers (and certainly L1 writers in certain circumstances) may well possess an assertive Western-style voice, but choose not to use it in their writing. Hirvela and Belcher (2001) describe Jacinta, an L2 writer who had concerns about the political, professional, and personal safety ramifications of personal voice and self-representations that challenge mainstream ideologies in her field and in her country. Johns (1991) suggests that offering a strong self in writing for Chinese and Japanese writers can be at odds with the Confucian notion of education as knowledge transmission, not personal invention. Kamani (2000) from Bombay expresses his personal discomfort with expectations of self-disclosure: “In America ... I was expected to come clean on information, feelings, ignorance, speculations, judgment—largely taboo in India and considered bizarre” (p. 100). Canagarajah (2001) brought the Tamil discourse style to his academic writing and was criticized for using the wrong type of voice. He switched to the Western style, only to have his Tamil colleagues object to the absence of *avai a Takaam*, which means hum-

bling oneself before the court, and is the expected way of opening a paper Tamil-style. Canagarajah says that his writing has suffered in a number of ways from the disjuncture between his two writing worlds. He advocates for recognition that there are academic worlds beyond the North American one. He does not enjoy the writing process any more and regrets going so far to meet the demands of the center.

Connor (1996) says that she, like most Finns, does not openly reveal her thoughts, uses more hedges, and is indirect in her writing. This certainly conflicts with the common expectation English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers have that students be direct and firm in expressing their convictions in writing. Lu (1998) notes that in revolutionary China, language was a tool for survival, and she was taught to be "a bystander" (p. 79) in her own writing. Similarly, another L2 writer, Shen (1998), describes the need for Western voice as not a surface shift but a seismic one: "The *I* must be buried in writing in Chinese" (p. 124); consequently, she had to change her sense of self/*I* in order to express herself acceptably in English (and notes that she writes more aggressively in English).

It occurs to me that as a writing instructor of culturally diverse students, I have expected students to take a stand, to offer a clear opinion, to exhibit confidence on a topic after little reflection or information on their part, and have not appreciated students' feelings of discomfort at pretending to feel strongly or to know a great deal about something to which they have only given 30 minutes of thought. This is a sobering realization.

Critical Theory

Acknowledging, valuing, and teaching only the Western approach to writing is addressed by a number of writers engaged in critical theory and critical pedagogy. Freire (1998) criticizes the banking model of education: transmission in order to assimilate learners, which he describes as a domesticating process. Similarly, Street (1993) warns of privileging one group's literacy and discourse practices, elevating them to a universal status. Canagarajah (1999) and Pennycook (1995) question the reproduction model and suggest a resistance perspective. The caution here seems to be against teachers presenting Western writing practices as *the* way rather than *a* way of expressing oneself. Writing teachers and the teaching of writing must undergo critical examination and reflection. If teachers do not "clarify underlying assumptions" (assuming, I suppose, that they first have identified these assumptions), "this may lead to hostility and contempt on the part of learners who apply their own cultural framework as a yardstick" (Fitzgerald, 1999, citing Loveday, 1982). "If the disjuncture between the learner's old set of beliefs and new experiences is too great, this produces passive resistance or non-learning" (p. 129, citing Jarvis, 1987). "Education takes place," says Freire (1998),

when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue. Both participants bring knowledge to the relationship and one of the objects of the pedagogic process is to explore what each other knows and what they can teach each other. (p. 8)

Speaking to teachers at a recent TESL Ontario conference, Dei (2001) advised us that "one must be humble when claiming to know."

Referring specifically to the evaluation of the writing of NNSs, Ballard and Clanchy (1992) write that teachers are rarely sensitive enough to the rhetorical style/cultural connection significance, so when "faced with writing with that falls outside their own notions of acceptable style and pattern of argument, they pepper the margins with 'irrelevant,' 'incoherent,' 'illogical'" (p. 20). The possibility that these students are employing fundamentally different (and not necessarily inferior or incorrect) structures of discourse rarely occurs to instructors, who may themselves be only marginally aware of how languages vary.

It seems important, then, that we writing instructors not only acknowledge, but also explore with students the students' own ways of knowing. They may not produce exactly what we expect or what we feel safe with: "Their texts and interpretations can challenge us to recognize our own rhetorical prejudice and to reconceptualize our perspectives on academic discourse—a mutually enriching process" (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi).

Awareness of contrastive patterns may allow certain students to view their writing problems as not so much individual inadequacies as their participation in different discourse communities (Leki, 1992). This may well lower students' affective filters as they better understand their own practices of writing within one culture and across cultures.

The readership of academic writing is becoming as diverse as the authorship. Diverse readership implies diverse notions of what constitutes good writing. Land and Whitley (1998), found that readers whose L1 was not English rated a group of papers written by NS and NNSs of equal quality, whereas the L1 teachers rated the papers of ESL writers lower. Their conclusion was that NNS readers can accommodate a wider range of rhetorical patterns than can NS readers. We instructors of academic writing may be doing our students a disservice in preparing them to write only for Western audiences by assuming that the academic audience in the West is Western or cannot learn to become accustomed to a variety of discourse styles. "What U.S. academics call rhetoric is really only Western rhetoric" (Spack, 1998, p. 295, citing Matalene, 1985). The West, it seems, is losing the copyright on standard written (and spoken) English.

Pedagogical Implications/Possibilities

What, then, in the light of the above information, might writing instructors do to help students make the journey (not necessarily a one-way journey) to

writing that is acceptable to the Western academic community of readers? Kramsch (1993) suggests synthesizing perspectives of the L1 and L2 and cites Bakhtin's (1986) call to help learners be present in their own utterances and develop a double-voiced discourse. Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, and Crozet (1999) suggest a third place, not a complete departure from L1 ways of knowing nor a total capitulation to the L2 ways of knowing, but a hybrid third possibility. Wiwa (2001) describes his default identity: a default accent. I like this notion and think it could be applied to discourse style as well. Students might consider one style of academic writing as their default, but be prepared to call up the other when necessary. Canagarajah (1999) advises offering alternatives to students without erasing their voices. For example, religious comments in a text can be replaced by appropriate citations from the Bible properly cited. In this way, although taking academic conventions seriously, the writer still finds space for his or her own voice to emerge. Hirvela and Belcher (2001) raise the issue of the tendency of L2 writing instructors to overlook the voices or identities already possessed by L2 writers: "Voice shouldn't be an instructional goal but something to be analyzed as writers move from L1 to L2" (p. 95) and, I would add, back again. The move should be viewed as temporary or context-specific, that is, additive not subtractive. Cummins (2000) in encouraging transformational pedagogy, cites the New London Group, who suggest starting with the variation, not with the standard, and then focusing on the change. The dialogic approach of Bakhtin might, according to Carr (1999), present possibilities to the teacher and to the learner. Canagarajah (1999) conceives of "discourse instruction in binary terms—moving from one discourse to the other—from the native to the alien—from the familiar to the strange ... multivocal texts ... merging discourses" (p. 166). I suggest that the notion of binary might better be envisaged by teachers as a continuum. Depending on the writing situation, and the intention of the writer, more or less of the writer's "familiar" (L1) writing practice and the writer's "strange" (L2) practice would be called up. Consensus in the literature that I reviewed seems to indicate that cognitively and affectively, students might well benefit from an approach that aims for addition rather than subtraction, for growth rather than erasure, for a blend rather than purity.

Given the challenges of learning and teaching academic writing, Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996, 1997, challenged by Raimes and Zamel, 1997) consider the practical issue of *who* should teach academic writing: the ESL teacher or the academic discipline teacher. Cumming (1988) suggests that some of the challenges of disciplinary writing may be particular to the academic discipline and not necessarily a function of the foreign language. Atkinson (2001) notes, for example, the withdrawal of voice in Western scientific written discourse. This question of who teaches academic or disciplinary writing seems to be an important question; it has been raised

numerous times in my own teaching settings (community colleges) and has led to adjunct ESL/content courses, to team teaching between the ESL writing instructor and the content instructor, and other pilot strategies that have not remained operationally practical in the long run. There seem to be no easy answers to this question of who teaches academic writing to ESL students preparing to enter or already engaged in disciplinary courses. Raimes and Zamel contend that writing instructors cannot legitimately teach discipline material. Ramanathan and Kaplan suggest the disciplinary teacher should have a larger role in writing across the curriculum; discipline-related reading would reinforce the learner's awareness of form, content, and vocabulary of the discipline. (How authentic or useful, they ask, is it for students to be asked to write essays on abortion or gay rights, a typical essay topic in ESL academic writing classes?) The disciplinary teacher, they argue, would be need and be enriched by engaging in language awareness training.

What should be taught, who should do the teaching are not the only questions being asked about the issue of writing and culture. Textbooks are not spared by Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996). They note that most writing texts designed for L2 learners lack awareness of the L2 writer's rhetorical history because they are insensitive to topic and assume the universality of Western discourse habits. Although expounding on the importance of audience, textbook writers "fail to honor their own audience" (p. 31). This observation corresponds to my own experience with standard writing texts.

Yet students have a right to the code of power and right now, right here, in North America, it is still standard Western English. Delpit (1988) and Cummins (2000) raise the notion of dual responsibility: that of the non-native speakers (NNS) to learn and conform to the norm and that of the English-speaking teacher to learn how to best assist them. The strategy of avoidance will marginalize students. "If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier" (Delpit, p. 282).

At the same time, while L2 writers are adjusting their writing to accommodate Western expectations, can the Western academic community be creative, be more tolerant, set aside its restrictions and conventions to consider alternate modes? Canagarajah (2001), Kulwicki (2001), and Julia and Belcher (2001) all write of the gatekeeping function that discourse style plays in academic journals. A factor in the success of acquiring a new discourse style is "ego permeability" (Leki, 1992, p. 13) and capacity for novelty. We expect it of our NNS; can Western teachers, journal editors, and readers achieve it ourselves?

A Teacher Reconsiders Her Practice

It startles me, after this review of research, how as a writing instructor I have ignored the principle I hold most dear in my teaching of oral language:

accessing and building on the prior knowledge or experience of the student. In writing classes I realize now, I focus immediately on where the student is going rather than on where he or she is coming from. I do not believe I am alone in this failure to acknowledge as well as appreciate the students' L1 writing styles. I frequently have opportunities to observe other teachers. Articles that describe the practice of experienced writing instructors (Cumming, 1992) offer additional descriptions of writing instruction. Moving from the familiar to the strange does not appear to be practiced in the writing classes I observe, in the classes that I read about, or in the classes that I teach.

After some consideration, I would like to try the following strategies in the college EAP classroom.

- Engage, with my EAP students, in some contrastive/connective analysis of rhetorical style. At least once during a course, ask the student to write on a topic in a style that feels familiar (L1 style) and then on the same topic in L2 style, noting the similarities and differences.
- Open for discussion what students consider to be important in writing from their writing/reading experience in L1. I imagine voice would be addressed here. Negotiate with them how much they can bring of what they value to the L2 and still be considered successful writers in the new environment. Expose students to the experiences or feelings of some of the L2 writers mentioned in this article.
- Try myself (and have the prospective ESL teachers that I train try) to address a composition topic in a non-Western style (using a model) to understand better the challenges or collisions that students experience. I imagine this would be difficult even with the exquisite luxury of my (our) being able to write in the first language.
- Think twice before noting to a student that his or her writing is "disorganized." Try to distinguish between what is truly disorganized and "differently organized."

If educators are to be agents of change, then we need to be willing to change as well. Awareness of and use of strategies to address some of the cultural collisions that occur in second-language academic writing seems a fine place to start.

One way to enable students to find their way in the academy, we believe, is for us to accept wider varieties of expression, to embrace multiple ways of communicating. This is exactly what we are asking students to do. (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi)

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