

More heat than light: controversies in second language writing

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Abstract

This paper examines four areas of controversy in second language writing: contrastive rhetoric, ideology and politics, personal versus academic writing, and assessment. It questions the value of the resulting debate for second language writing instructors and in the end concludes that these controversies are of little practical value.

1. Introduction

According to Silva (1990) the history of ESL composition has consisted of a rather unproductive cycle in which approaches emerge not fully formed, are evangelically promoted, accepted uncritically, then rejected prematurely in favour of a new but not necessarily better approach. This he concludes generates more heat than light. He calls for approaches that meaningfully account for the writer, reader, text, and context, as well as their interaction. This paper examines four areas of controversy: contrastive rhetoric, ideology and politics, academic versus personal writing and assessment. It concludes that despite all the sparks, second language writing still has some way to go before it produces a flame that can light the way for teachers in the writing classroom.

2. Contrastive rhetoric

There is something no one talks about when they talk about contrastive rhetoric. The antecedents of contrastive rhetoric are structural linguistics and behaviourism, both of which have been soundly condemned in the field of Second Language Acquisition studies. Contrastive rhetoric began with Robert Kaplan's (1966) article in *Language Learning*. Matsuda (2001, p.260, cited in Casanave 2004) states Kaplan, was influenced by Whorf-Sapir. Sapir was a leading structural linguist and cultural anthropologist. Whorf was Sapir's disciple. In fact, it isn't necessary to know this connection in order to see that contrastive rhetoric is an extension of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH).

A look back at the assumptions underlying CAH will make the connection clear. Gass &

Selinker (2001, pp. 72, 73) provides a succinct list of these assumptions:

1. Contrastive Analysis is rooted in a theory of language that claims that language is habit. Language learning, then involves learning a new set of habits.
2. The major source of error in the production and reception of a second language is the native language.
3. Errors can be explained by examining the differences between the L1 and the L2, including differences in the cultural systems.
4. The greater the differences between the L1 and L2 the more errors will occur.
5. What is different between L1 and L2 is what must be learned. Similarities involve no new learning.
6. The difficulty in learning a second language is directly proportional to the extent of the differences with the native language.

The same assumptions underpin contrastive rhetoric. Contrastive rhetoric just extends these assumptions to include the structures organising paragraphs and whole texts. The assumptions listed above, rooted as they were in behaviourism, ultimately led to the demise of contrastive analysis once language came to be seen in terms of structured rules instead of habits, and language learning came to be seen as active rule formation rather than habit formation. Yet contrastive rhetoric has not suffered the same fate. Perhaps it is Kaplan's memorable graphic representations of the rhetorical patterns he perceived in various languages including: the straight line for English, representing a direct linear structure; and the widening gyre for Chinese, Korean and Japanese, representing an indirect structure that keeps contrastive rhetoric alive. As Casanave (2004, p. 30) says, "these doodles simply will not go away". Can there be some merit to this field of inquiry despite the fact that the theories from which it takes its basic assumptions have been condemned? If we concentrate our analysis on structural and organisational features of different texts written in different languages, differences are regularly found (Casanave 2004, p.29). Or are they and even if they are, of what value are they to second language writing pedagogy?

John Hinds has been one of the most influential supporters of contrastive rhetoric. According to Eggington (1987, p.161), Hinds has verified Kaplan's assertion that "culturally influenced rhetorical patterns play an important role in effective communication through the written medium". Hinds' studies have supported the "widening gyre" pattern in Asian languages known as *qui cheng zhun he* in Chinese, *ki shoo ten ketsu* in Japanese, and *ki sung chon kyul* in Korean. These terms have been commonly glossed as "introduction", "development", "turn" and "conclusion" (Cahill, 2003, p.171). Hines has added to this the notion of reader responsibility (Hines 1987, cited in Kubota 1997) and the claim that a "quasi-inductive" rhetorical pattern or "delayed introduction of purpose" exists in Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Thai (Hinds 1990). Previously,

a dichotomy between deductive organisation in English and inductive organisation in Asian languages had been proposed. Hinds based his claims on analyses of newspaper articles in Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Thai publications. Only one of the analysed texts originally appeared in English. The important question is: so what?

The “so what?” for Hinds is this, the texts that he examined have:
a superficial rhetorical structure that approximates the general inductive style familiar to composition teachers and students in the West. This is a fallacious familiarity...when English-speaking readers recognise that a composition is not organized deductively, they categorize the composition as inductive, thus preventing them from understanding the true differences between competent writing in other languages. (p.90).

So then, the problem is a difference between what the writer thinks the reader expects and what the reader actually does expect, according to Hinds. He says that, “the Western notion ‘you can’t count on the minds of others working the same way your mind works’ may not be relevant to the cultural climate of other countries” (p.98). Therefore, Asian students need be made aware of the writer’s responsibility to be explicit in English. Characterising the need for explicit writing as a “western notion” is problematic at best. Nevertheless, there is some agreement among writers in the field of English writing instruction that shared knowledge between writer and reader should not be taken for granted due to the physical distance between the two (for an example see White, 1987). Ironically, the supporters of contrastive rhetoric take a whole lot for granted, including: the idea that a pure culture can be defined in a modern society, that this culture defines thought patterns, these thought patterns are inherent in the language of the culture, these thought patterns are expressed in language through “preferred” patterns of rhetoric, these “preferred” patterns of rhetoric have a single agreed upon form, and that these rhetorical patterns will be transferred to the second language and handicap the second language learner. These assumptions don’t stand up to scrutiny.

First, ethnographic studies have demonstrated that defining a pure form of a culture in a modern society is difficult (Clifford 1988, cited in Kubota 1997). Kubota (1997) argues, “language and culture need to be viewed as dynamic rather than exotic and static”. Also, the assertion that *ki shoo ten ketsu* represents a typical pattern in Japanese expository writing is an over generalisation based on a few selected samples. Furthermore, disagreement over interpretations and functions of *ki shoo ten ketsu* among Japanese composition specialists weakens the claim that it is the preferred style in Japanese. Finally she argues that a review of the development of modern Japanese reveals an ongoing influence from English and other European languages on Japanese writing (p. 462).

Cahill’s (2003) investigation confirmed Kubota’s conclusions about Japanese and casts doubt

on the conclusions about Chinese made by contrastive rhetoric. Cahill contends that incomprehensibility in Asian student writing might be due to the difficulty in learning the conventions of academic writing, something that is difficult in one's native language let alone one's second language. Also, errors attributed to L1 interference may simply be part of the cognitive sequence of stages that all second language learners go through (p.172). In other words explanations for Asian student writers' errors can be found in current theories of second language acquisition.

So we come round again to this question of why contrastive rhetoric continues to be explored despite the fact that its theoretical basis has been abandoned. Perhaps the reason is that the appeal of contrastive rhetoric does not depend on SLA theory but instead on ideology. Cahill goes so far as to say that the appeal is "mythological". He makes reference to Barthes and concludes, "contrastive rhetoric has mythologized the 'turn' by encoding it with comforting illusions and stereotypes about Eastern thought, psychology, culture and writing"(p.187).

3. Ideology and politics

Implicit in the above is a concern with power relationships. Even among proponents of contrastive rhetoric, this concern with power relationships is voiced. Eggington (1987) expresses concern that Korean scholars educated in English have adopted a linear style of writing, even in their native language, which he fears is incomprehensible to their colleagues and students who have not received the same benefit. He recommends instruction in both traditional Korean styles and the English-influenced academic style. Eggington concludes that to do otherwise would smack of linguistic imperialism (p.167).

In her review of the development of modern Japanese, Kubota (1997) points to unequal power relationships. She says that the Japanese language was transformed through a struggle for power in unequal relations between Japan and the West (p.472). She states further that the current global spread of English is a testament to the existence of varieties of English and she cites Land and Whitley's (1989) suggestion that teachers value the cultural values that ESL students bring with them. Teachers should change the ways they respond to and evaluate ESL student writing and work toward making U.S. rhetoric more pluralistic. This concern with power relations and placing value on the cultural values of ESL students is present also in an emerging perspective in the field of teaching English to students of other languages called Critical Applied Linguistics.

The reference to Barthes in Cahill (2003) above is telling. Critical Applied Linguistics is a branch of Critical Theory, encompassing postmodernism and poststructuralism. A full explication of Critical Theory is beyond the scope of this paper and therefore we will content ourselves with the summary provided by Santos (2001, p.175):

The aims and methods of critical theory are threefold: (a) To problematize every dominant site in society (e.g., the legal and educational systems) and every subject (e.g., literature and language studies) by exposing the unequal power relations operating within them that marginalize and exclude subordinate groups (b) to contest the power structures of these sites and subjects through challenge and resistance; and (c) to subvert and transform them through actions that will “effect a shift in power from the privileged and the powerful to those groups struggling to gain a measure of control over their lives” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 115).

From here Critical Theory and Critical Applied Linguistics branch into Critical Pedagogy, and critical English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It is here that it comes into conflict with mainstream approaches to L2 writing instruction, that have viewed the role of the teacher as primarily to help students cope with the demands of academic writing. This mainstream approach has been characterised as Pragmatism.

Benesch (2001, p.162) argues that Pragmatism is an ideological stance despite the claims of its proponents. Pennycook (1997, cited in Santos, 2001) goes further, condemning Pragmatism as unethical because it supports existing inequalities. Advocates of critical EAP and L2 writing see the native languages of international students as equal to academic discourses of English and universities should adapt to them rather than the converse. With regard to Pedagogy, the content of EAP and L2 writing courses should be presented from a socio-political standpoint and challenge and deconstruct academic discourses rather than encouraging students to accept and practice them (Santos, 2001, p.179). Therefore, the goal of L2 writing instruction should be critical literacy. Central to critical literacy, according to Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999, p. 529) is the ability to read *resistantly* and write *critically* (authors' italics). Pragmatists have countered that critical EAP is extreme. Santos (2001) criticises the premise that everything is political and even implies that critical EAP is un-American. Clearly the conflict is heated but what light has it shed on L2 writing pedagogy, especially L2 writing pedagogy in Japan

Frankly, there is little remarkable in the examples of critical pedagogy found in Benesch (2001) and Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999). The procedures they describe: guidance in good note-taking, help writing questions to instructors requesting clarification of assignments, encouraging students to begin acting as a community and to negotiate course requirements, in the case of Benesch; and direct instruction in academic genres, presentation of a variety of material illustrating a variety of view points centred on a particular issue, and facilitating discussion of these issues, in the case of Hammond and Macken-Horarik, do not differ from procedures employed by the majority of EAP instructors. It is only the impetus underlying the procedures that is different. It seems that proponents of critical EAP and L2 composition assume a blank slate, like teachers of old they view students as empty vessels to be filled. However, for them it is not only knowledge and skills that students lack but also critical thinking skills. The reality

though is that students possess knowledge and critical thinking skills and the role of the teacher is to create the conditions in which students may demonstrate these abilities.

4. Personal versus academic writing

A far more illuminating debate occurred in a series of exchanges between David Bartholomae (1995, 1995a) and Peter Elbow (1995, 1995a) in *College Composition and Communication*. The exchanges, actually more like turns in a conversation rather than a debate, are clearly informed by the theories and issues that inform the critical EAP — Pragmatist conflagration. Bartholomae (1995) begins the exchange by discussing the problem of defining academic writing:

If...it means the writing that is done by academics, or the writing that passes as currency in the academy, then it is a precise term only when it is loaded: academic writing — the unreadable created by the unspeakable; academic writing — stuffy, pedantic, the price of a career; academic writing — pure, muscular, lean taut, the language of truth and reason; academic writing — language stripped of the false dressings of style and fashion, a tool for inquiry and technique (p.62).

He goes on to argue in favour of academic writing as a part of undergraduate studies and further to argue that academic writing is the real work of the academy.

For Bartholomae the teacher is a central figure. There is no writing in the academic realm without teachers. The teacher connects the students with the power, tradition, authority of past theories and people present in the context of writing. and he argues that students cannot be free of this and the classroom cannot be a free utopian space (p.67). He equates personal writing with sentimental realism, which he calls, “a corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre”, and he argues that students are a product of their time and to teach them otherwise would be to perpetuate a lie (p.70). Bartholomae’s approach is to deny students their own presence in their writing and instead ask them to read their work as a text already written by the culture, looking at it critically in order to see what voices and content it allows and what voices and content it excludes. He then advises students to rewrite their papers in such a way that they go against the grain of the discourse (1995a, p.85). Sound familiar?

Elbow’s approach is different. Elbow(1995) wants his students to become both academics and writers (1995, p.73). He sees a conflict between these goals despite the fact that he sees himself as both a writer and an academic. Academics read and so, to a degree one can frame the conflict as one between readers and writers. The conflict is over who gets control of the text (p.75). Another conflict is between writers professing to know more than they can say and the claim of readers, teachers and academics that all knowledge is linguistic. This leads Elbow to what he calls a major pedagogical point. He says, “The main thing that helps writers is to be understood;

pointing out misunderstandings is only the second need. Thus it is a crucial consequence - I assume that students know more than they are getting into words." (p.77). Could L2 writing instructors make a better assumption? Elbow does not agree that no writing is done without teachers. He says, "The most striking fact about language acquisition is the absence of teaching." Students learn to write by being around writing and it is empowering to students to know that they can learn so much without being taught (1995a, p.92).

The theories and issues of concern to critical EAP are so obviously present in the exchanges between Bartholomae and Elbow that it is perhaps partly the framing of these exchanges as discussion rather than debate that makes them so appealing. The fact that the writing is lovely doesn't hurt either. Perhaps it is the absence of the shadow of conflict that draws the reader into the issues in a way that the critical EAP-Pragmatist debate didn't. More importantly, however, Elbow's approach resonates with L2 writing teachers in an EFL setting more than the approaches taken by any of the people mentioned thus far, including Bartholomae. Finally, one more interesting perspective offered by Elbow leads into the last topic to be examined. He says that much odd writing behaviour exhibited by students makes perfect sense once we realise that they are behaving as test takers, not as writers.

5. Assessment

Of all the topics discussed thus far, assessment is probably the one with the most relevance to L2 writing teachers in Japan. Tests do not go away here and they are often the only concern students have. At present, apart from those students who aim to study overseas, most Japanese students encounter assessment of their writing in the context of a single course. Writing courses are the exception in secondary schools and where they do exist many students fail to see the value in them. Writing courses are more commonly found at the tertiary level. The fact that stakes are lower once students have entered university may actually give teachers greater freedom to use non-standard assessment procedures. Portfolio assessment would fit in here. Hamp-Lyons (1996) emphatically calls portfolios an excellent pedagogical tool but questions whether they are equally excellent assessment tools. She also points out that scoring guides, rating scales and specialised scoring procedures have not yet been developed for portfolios, let alone validated (p.66). There are a number of reasons why these questions should not dissuade teachers in Japan from using portfolios, the first being that Hamp-Lyons was talking about portfolio assessment with respect to assessment for the purposes of entrance to, placement in, and exit from educational institutions. Portfolios would not likely be used for these purposes in Japan. Even if they were, Hayes, Hatch, & Silk (2000), which looked at holistic assessment in a naturalistic setting, showed very low reliability. Weigle (1994) showed improvement in reliability with rater training but as Elbow

(1993) points out, rater agreement comes at the expense of the way people normally read. It in effect robs writers of the opportunity to learn how various readers view their work. We find ourselves once again looking to Elbow's approach for relevance to the situation in Japan.

Elbow(1993) calls into question the usefulness of ranking which he calls, "the act of summing up one's judgement into a single, holistic number or score" (p.187). He does not suggest that ranking or assigning grades be done away with entirely. Indeed, he acknowledges the desire among students to be ranked. What he does advocate is a more eclectic approach to assessment that is more communicative. He argues that constant evaluation by authority figures makes students reluctant to take risks necessary for good learning. Anyone teaching in Japan knows the truth of this argument. Anyone teaching in Japan also knows that students have grown up with the expectation that they will be ranked and evaluated. Elbow's approach may offer teachers a way of accommodating these conflicting student needs. It is most certainly more practical than other approaches to assessment that require multiple raters. Something that is usually impossible in Japan. Portfolios may not be ideal but surely they are better than a single end-of-term test. As Nation (2008, p.147) says, "...assessing learners' writing on just one piece of writing is likely to be neither reliable nor valid." On the other hand, what else can a teacher do when faced with a class of fifty writing students, a situation not uncommon in Japan.

We have looked at four areas in which controversies are occurring in second language writing. We have seen that these areas interact with each other and themes reoccur across boundaries. We have seen that hot debates exist within the L2 writing community but for all the heat very little light emerges to aid L2 writing teachers. Yes, looking at the various perspectives gives one pause for reflection. Reflection leads to new insights. Nevertheless only one figure emerges here who has much to offer English writing instructors in Japan and that is Peter Elbow. Elbow's approach is the only one that comes close to fulfilling the criteria for a viable approach to ESL composition suggested by Silva. The rest have just provided us with a few fireworks. Furthermore, these controversies come out of ESL and EAP contexts. They assume conditions that do not exist in Japan. English writing teachers in Japan need research conducted in the Japanese academic context.

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